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OR, Sulphur Sam's Double.

A Romance of the Wild Lands
of the Yampah.

BY J. C. COWDRICK,
AUTHOR OF "RAINBOW ROB," "KENTUCKY
JEAN," "BLUE-GRASS BURT," "GILBERT OF
GOTHAM," "THE GIANT CUPID,"
"BROADWAY BILLY" STORIES,
ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I. "HANDS UP!"

FAINT but clear rung out the silvery tones of a cornet, waking the echoes of the mountain wilderness with one of Foster's most plaintive airs, the notes reverberating from hill to hill and dying away at last in the valleys and canyons.

It was in Northwestern Colorado, in the wild region north of the Yampah River and near the Little Snake River whose united waters go to form the majestic Colorado.

The time was twilight—that mystic hour

IT WAS SULPHUR SAM. WHOOPING AND YELLING HE DASHED AWAY UP THE VALLEY
AT BREAKNECK SPEED, FIRING HIS REVOLVERS AS HE WENT.

'twixt daylight and dark when everything is seen in an uncertain light and the eyes are easily deceived. The site was wild and rugged. A lofty mountain road, with huge rocks on every hand, among which, here and there, stood trees of stunted growth and fantastic shapes. Away to the right, far beyond the most distant hills, was a background of red light that resembled the reflection of a great fire, which the sun had left in going down. The road could be seen for only a short distance in either direction, for it was very winding. To the north, the eye looked down into a long, narrow valley, partly hid by a veil of fog, and afar down, the fog, the rocks, the trees—all blended together in one dark, uniform tint, which contrasted with the azure and red of the heavens. To the south the road—or trail—wound away and down into a deep, dark canyon, the entrance to which was not more than a mile distant.

A special stage was on its way to the town of Pot Leg, on the Little Snake River, and was nearing its destination. On the day previous it had started from a point on the Union Pacific Railroad, had laid over all night at the Snake River Settlement, and was now completing its journey from the latter point.

The passengers, a special party, were all in good spirits, but were glad their long and tedious ride was coming to an end.

The party consisted of Colonel Lincoln Featherstone and wife, their son and daughter, the daughter's maid, two invited guests, and an old guide whose services had been engaged for the season.

The Featherstones were from New York, and were wealthy. Mrs. Featherstone was out of health, and her doctor had prescribed a summer in Colorado, assuring her that it would do her more real good than any medicine in the pharmacopæia that he could order.

Accordingly, preparations had been made, upon a new plan, for spending the summer in that grand, health-giving country. For some weeks a force of men had been at work, putting up several buildings and tents a little apart from the town of Pot Leg, and now the work was done. Furniture and servants had been sent, and all was in readiness.

This innovation was due to Colonel Featherstone. When the Colorado prescription was presented to him for approval, he said:

"We will go, of course; but we will not follow the beaten track. We will not go to Denver, nor to any other well-known town, where we would have to herd with people with more money than brains, and be badgered by hotel-keepers. We will camp in the wilderness, as it were. We will go right out into the wilds, away from the sound of the locomotive, and there pitch our tents."

And so it was arranged. The colonel and his son went out first, chose the place and made all arrangements, and now the party was on its way to Empire Camp.

"Empire Camp" was a name chosen by Miss Featherstone for the little settlement. She would not, she declared, go one step, if the place was to be called Pot Leg. A pretty name, truly, to put at the head of one's letters!

That was good argument, so Empire Camp was accepted, instead. The colonel, however, would stick to Pot Leg, and insisted that "Empire Camp" robbed the place of half its charm. If it *must* be called Empire Camp, he argued, why not call it, in full, "Empire-Camp-near-Pot-Leg-on-the-Little-Snake?"

And now—as well here as anywhere—a few words of personal description.

On the box of the stage sat the driver and the party's guide. The driver was a long, lank individual named Gideon Bigg, but he was far better known as "Big Gid." The guide was a man of fifty, of good stature and appearance. His hair was long, and his face was almost entirely covered with beard, there being but little room left for his nose and eyes. His name was Nate Redwood, but, like the driver, he had a nickname, and as "Nebraska Nate" he was widely and favorably known.

On the top sat Harold Featherstone and his friend Lucian Alanson. Both were young men of twenty-six, and both were quite good-looking and athletic. Harold was of good height and well proportioned, and had brown hair and mustache. Lucian was not so tall, quite, and wore a full beard that became him well. He was fairer than Harold, and his hair and beard were of a light color.

The rest of the party were inside.

Colonel Featherstone was fifty-five years old, but as hearty and full of vigor as the best of men are at forty. His hair and beard were white, but his complexion was ruddy, and his face was fat and jovial. He was of medium height, and his figure was plump and solid.

Mrs. Featherstone, though, was an invalid, and was thin and pale. She was a little woman, with a fair and kindly face, and was sweet and gentle in disposition. She had stood well the long and tiresome journey from New York, and even declared that she felt much better than when she started.

Their daughter, Frances, was a queenly girl of twenty-two. She was not really pretty, but was good-looking and winning, and possessed

her mother's gentleness of manner and goodness of heart.

Miss Myra Sheldon, one of Frances's school-day friends—one of the mentioned invited guests—was a handsome girl of twenty. She was a pronounced blonde, and really pretty. In truth, no fairer face was ever portrayed by an artist's brush; and, like Frances, she was as good as she was fair.

Nor did Pansy Mayflower, Miss Featherstone's maid, lack for beauty. She was a girl of eighteen, and as fresh and winning as a pretty wild rose. She was a little given to flirting, and had caused more than one masculine heart to flutter, by playful nod or tempting smile, while *en route* to the West.

While the four mules by which the stage was drawn were plodding up the long ascent from the valley to the point we have described, the passengers were all expatiating upon the beauties of the scene at the sunset hour; and when the stage reached the highest point, and the full glory of the scene burst upon them, words failed to express what they felt.

At Mrs. Featherstone's request the stage was stopped, and, in silence, all sat and gazed at the beautiful picture that was spread out before them. It was a picture of nature, a single touch of God's magic brush, a picture beyond the reach of any mortal artist. To the west was the glowing sky; to the north, the deep, fog-veiled valley; to the east, the dark robe of night lowering to cover all; to the south—But, while they gazed, enraptured, suddenly to their ears came the weird, startling tones of a cornet, and the air it voiced was in perfect harmony with the scene.

No one spoke.

Faint but clear the dulcet strain came to their ears, now rising and now falling, and the echoes caught it up and repeated each note again and again, until the hills seemed to be peopled with a host of elfin musicians, each one seeming to vie with all the others.

For several minutes the listeners were held as though enchanted, and then the last note died away and silence reigned.

"Snakes an' tarnation!" exclaimed Big Gid, "but that 'ar war bootiful."

"It war, an' that's a fact," echoed Nebraska Nate.

"Where did it come from?" asked Harold Featherstone.

"Give it up," answered Big Gid. "I ain't well 'quainted 'round heur, as I don't git down lower'n th' Settlement very often. I never heerd nothin' like it afore."

"No, ner I didn't," declared Nate. "It war awful fine. Have ye any idee what it war?"

"It was a cornet, unless I am very much mistaken," decided Lucian Alanson.

"And very well played, too," added Harold.

Remarks of a similar nature were at the same time being exchanged among those within the stage.

"Wasn't that perfectly charming?" exclaimed Miss Featherstone.

"It was grand!" affirmed Miss Sheldon.

"Just beautiful!" cried Pansy, clapping her hands delightedly. Pansy was a very privileged person, and with her all pleasing things were "beautiful."

"It was indeed thrilling," observed Mrs. Featherstone, "and it was so in keeping with the beautiful scene. Where can it have come from, I wonder, Lincoln?" addressing the colonel.

"I suppose it was some 'galoot' at Pot Leg, for we are near our destination now," responded the colonel.

"Ah! the charm is broken," sighed Miss Featherstone. "Pa, why will you insist upon mentioning that horrid name?"

"Shall I Latinize it? or translate it into Greek?" asked the colonel, laughing.

"I don't believe you could if you tried."

"Then I will ask my accomplished and aesthetic daughter to do it for me."

"Why do you not call it Empire Camp?"

"Oh!" exclaimed the colonel, "Empire Camp and Pot Leg are two distinct places now. You named our camp, my dear, but you did not change the name of the town. I believe in giving places their proper names."

The colonel laughed merrily, enjoying it as the biggest kind of a joke.

"Shall we go on?" the driver called out at that moment.

"Are you ready, mother?" asked the colonel, addressing Mrs. Featherstone.

"Yes," was the answer, "let us go on."

"Yes, drive on," the colonel shouted to the driver.

Big Gid drew up his lines, cracked his long whip, and the four mules started forward on the down-grade toward the canyon.

The canyon was not of great length, but it was deep, and at night was very dark. And night was now at hand. It was called Devil's Canyon, and at its southern end, where it came out abruptly into the valley, stood the town of Pot Leg.

Twilight in the mountains is very short, and already the red was disappearing from the sky, and the shadows along the road were growing deep and dark.

Big Gid, though, was a good driver, his teams were sure-footed, and, although he was not well acquainted with this particular trail, he pushed steadily on.

But they had descended only a little distance, when, just as the stage turned an abrupt bend, came the startling cry:

"Hands up!"

Big Gid pushed down the brake, reined in the mules, and brought the stage to a stop. Then, throwing up his hands as ordered, he responded:

"Up they go, mister, jest ez high ez I kin h'ist 'em. I don't need but one invite ter elevate my flips, you bet! when Sulphur Sam gives the word."

CHAPTER II.

PAYING THEIR TOLL.

SULPHUR SAM!

At that time—1878—no more startling name could have been mentioned in that region.

"He was," to quote our description of him in a previous story, "a highwayman in the true sense. He was an Ishmael. His hand was against every man, and every man's hand was against him. He was one of the most daring 'toll takers' Colorado had ever known. He had first made his appearance in the wild Yam-pah region, and from there had made his way all over the State, even making so bold as to utter his command of 'hands up!' to travelers within sight of Denver, and in broad daylight. He was as merciless, too, as bold, and many a deed of blood was laid to his account."

Such was Sulphur Sam; and, to quote again: "It is by no means our intention to make a 'hero' of such a character, but such men exist, and if we speak of them at all we must speak of them as we find them—just as we would speak of ravenous brutes."

This was the outlaw's first year on the upper trails of Colorado, and his name was a terror to travelers. More than one driver and passenger had he shot down in cold blood, and it is not to be wondered at that Big Gid was prompt to obey the command.

But in this instance the road-agent was *not* Sulphur Sam.

It is useless to attempt to describe the consternation and excitement that instantly prevailed. Mrs. Featherstone fainted; the three young women uttered screams of fright; and, among them all, Colonel Featherstone had his hands full.

They all had heard of Sulphur Sam, and during the first few miles of their journey by stage, had sat in trembling expectancy and fear of seeing him at any moment. As he did not appear, however, they had gradually regained their courage, until now, so near their destination, he had passed entirely out of mind. But, at last, when least expected, had come the startling order—"Hands up!"

Those on top of the stage looked quickly in the direction whence the order came, and Nebraska Nate's ready hand fell upon and cocked a trusty revolver.

Big Gid heard the click of the hammer, and hastened to caution:

"Fer God's sake don't draw on Sam; it's sure death!"

Nate heard, but he did not heed, and the moment he caught sight of the dark figure of the man who had stopped the stage, he fired.

The man staggered back one step, as though hit, but immediately recovered himself and called out:

"Hands up! or you die."

Big Gid at that instant gave Nebraska Nate's arm a quick stroke, and the revolver he held went flying out into the road.

"Hands up!" repeated the road-agent, and he advanced a few steps.

Disarmed, Nate could only obey, as the driver and the two young men had already done.

"And now see that you keep them up," was the advice given. "If you move so much as a finger I'll let the night air into you. I was strongly tempted to drill one hole into you just for luck, Nebraska Nate. You are quick on the shoot, but I warn you not to try it on again. Hear me?"

"Yes, I hear you," returned Nate, savagely.

"Then see that you heed. And now, ladies and gentlemen, one and all, oblige me by getting out here and standing in a row."

Nebraska Nate had always prided himself upon his snap-shot ability with the revolver, and he wondered how he could have missed his man in this case.

He also felt very bitter toward Big Gid.

It was too late now, though, to mourn for the lost chance, and it was lucky for him, perhaps, that this was not Sulphur Sam as all supposed. No, we err; it was more fortunate for Sulphur Sam. Had it been he—But all this will be made plain in good time.

"Thar's no use kickin'," declared Big Gid, as he proceeded to get down. "We've got ter do jest ez ordered. I want ter mention, though, Mister Sulphur Samuel, that thar's a sick lady inside th' hearse. Be a leetle easy on her."

"A sick lady?" the road-agent interrogated.

"Yes."

"She need not get out, then," was the immediate decision.

"Bully fer you!"

"Come, though," was instantly added, "down and out of there, everybody else."

The passengers very reluctantly obeyed, and ranged themselves in a row alongside the stage, all holding up their hands.

It was a new experience for them. They had heard of such things, and had perhaps wondered how one man could possibly stop and rob a stage, unaided. Now they understood it.

The robber was masked, completely, and wore a sort of loose black gown that gave him an appearance terribly suggestive of cruelty and death. And the gleaming revolver in his hand seemed only too anxious to hurl a bullet into the first person who dared to disobey.

"Now, ladies and gentlemen," the supposed Sulphur Sam announced, "I am ready to relieve you of whatever money and valuables you happen to have with you."

"This is an outrage!" Colonel Featherstone exploded.

"I admit the outrage," returned the daring outlaw, coolly, "but I mean business just the same. Keep your hands well up, now, sir, and I will explore your pockets. The rest of you, meantime, be careful not to make any suspicious moves. If you do—Well, your spirit will shuffle off the mortal coil in a trifle less than no time. My pard in the cover over there will see to that."

With these remarks the robber advanced to Colonel Featherstone, led him two or three steps out of the line, and then proceeded to go through his pockets.

And he did it in a most thorough manner, too, taking everything of value that he could find.

"Do you not mean to leave me anything at all?" the colonel complained.

"Yes," answered the robber, "I shall leave your clothes and your life, if you do not cut up any tricks."

"But, my man, I shall need a little ready money before I can get more, and—"

"Exactly. That is, unfortunately, one of the sternest necessities of life. I need ready money myself, once in a while. Step back, now, and give some one else a chance to—Hands well up there, young man, if you value your life!"

The last was addressed to Harold Featherstone, whose face showed plainly his desire to draw a pistol and shoot this impudent rascal.

Lucian Alanson was the next to be searched, and him, too, the agent plucked clean.

The robber carried a handy and capacious bag under his gown, and into that the valuables of the party rapidly disappeared.

Nor did he spare the ladies, but forced them to deliver up all they had in the way of money and jewelry. Even Mrs. Featherstone, now out of her faint, who had been permitted to remain seated in the stage, was obliged to hand out her valuables.

And it was all done with consummate skill, too. Not for an instant did he take his eyes from the men, whom he held under constant cover of his weapon, yet at the same time he moved about freely, and within four or five minutes from the time when he had first stopped the stage his task was done.

"Now," he said, as he backed away a few steps, "bundle in there and drive on."

"You shall pay dearly for this," vowed Colonel Featherstone, hotly.

"Don't excite yourself, my dear sir," retorted the robber. "It is not good for you."

"You shall be hunted down."

"I sincerely hope not. But, that is all right, colonel! I must take my chances."

"You shall be hanged, sir!"

"Worse and worse. But, do not waste time on my account; get aboard your horse and move on. You will be late for supper."

Mrs. Featherstone and the three younger women were all crying, with excitement and vexation, and the colonel was in a towering rage. There was nothing to be done, though, but to obey, so all clambered back to their places in and on the stage.

"Now, Big Gid," directed the highwayman, who had suddenly disappeared from sight behind the rocks, "you may gather up your ribbons and drive on to Pot Leg. Before you start, however, allow me to set you right on a certain point. You have addressed me as Sulphur Sam, but I am not that cut-throat."

"What! ain't Sulphur Sam? then who be ye?"

"A lone stranger on this trail, not even a pard to support me. What I said of a pard was all for effect."

"How d'ye come ter know my name?" Big Gid demanded.

"An' mine, too," added Nebraska Nate.

"Now if I should tell you I guessed them," the road-agent responded, "you would not believe me, so I may as well own up that a little bird told me."

"You're too smart ter live long," observed Big Gid, "an' if I'd ha' knowed ye warn't Sulphur Sam, you bet I'd made it warm fer ye."

"Ha, ha, ha!" the robber laughed, "I see you have a wholesome fear of Sulphur Sam. I am obliged to Sammy, I am sure, for making my task so easy."

"I don't deny it," Big Gid honestly acknowledged. "He put out poor Tom Dale's light

only a week ago, an' shot a passenger right on th' seat a-side o' me one night. I've no desire to pass in my checks yet."

"I cannot blame you. Sulphur Sam is a bad man to fool with, and no mistake. And, by the way, if ever we meet again I hope you will show as good sense as you have on this occasion. I have no desire to have your blood on my hands."

"I hope we won't meet ag'in."

"No doubt we will, though," declared the highwayman, "for I have come to stay. If there is anything I detest, it is monopoly, and Sulphur Sam has been having things his own way here long enough. I want a share of the good things myself."

"You will both come to the end of a rope, sooner or later," shouted Colonel Featherstone, fiercely.

"I hope I shall not, my dear sir. But you will think better of me when you come to know me. I am afraid I have not made a very good first impression. I could not do any better, however, under the circumstances, I assure you."

"You hain't answered my question yet, Mister Road-agent," Big Gid here reminded.

"So? Pardon me. What was your question?"

"I asked ye who ye be, sence ye say ye ain't Sulphur Sam."

"Oh! I beg your pardon, Mr. Gideon. You want my name, eh? Well, you may call me Charlie. Charlie is a good name, is it not? Such names as Sam, Bob, Rob, and Dick, are getting a little threadbare in this region, I fancy, so you may call me Charlie, if you please. That hardly fills the bill, either, standing alone; I must add—or rather prefix—something to it. What shall it be? Ah! I have it! I was admiring the beauties of the sunset hour just before you came along, enjoying a twilight dream as it were; suppose you call me Twilight Charlie. Ha, ha, ha! just the thing. It will always remind you of our first meeting, and—Oh! by the way, I have an idea that Sulphur Sam is lying in wait for you down there in the canyon. If so, please give him my regards. I intend to set myself up as Sulphur Sam's counterpoise. Good-night!"

CHAPTER III.

SULPHUR SAM APPEARS.

TWILIGHT CHARLIE had had his horse concealed behind the near-by rocks and trees, had quietly mounted, and now, as he bade good-night, he sprang out into sight once more and dashed away up the road.

"Wal, of all the cool cusses I ever see'd!" exclaimed Big Gid, as he gazed after him. "If that ain't Sulphur Sam himself, he's Samuel's equal, an' don't ye fergit it."

"He's got narve an' sand, an' lots of it," declared Nebraska Nate.

"Well, Lucian," remarked Harold Featherstone, to his friend, "we have had our first Western adventure."

"Right you are!" returned Alanson; "and no trifling adventure, either. I am left without a dollar."

"Same here," owned Harold. "It is a little rough on us, too, after the way we have been boasting to each other how we would bring our brand new revolvers into play if any highwayman had the audacity to stop us. Ha, ha, ha!"

They both laughed, though neither felt in a laughing mood.

"You young fellers will l'arn more'n one lesson afore th' summer is over, I'm a-thinkin'," observed Nate. "You're only tenderfeet, an' mighty tender at that, too."

"I believe you, old man," Harold confessed.

"We're not fools enough, though, to submit tamely to such an outrage as this," blurted Colonel Featherstone from the door of the stage, "and that highwayman shall be hunted down."

"Easier said than done, I opine," suggested Big Gid. "Th' stage companies has had big rewards posted for Sulphur Sam fer a month or more, but it don't do no good."

"Well, we'll do something," vowed the angry colonel. "Drive on to Pot Leg."

Big Gid gathered up his lines and flung out his whip, but, stopping short, he turned to Nate, saying:

"Don't fergit yer revolver out thar in th' road, pardner. Sorry I had ter knock it outen yer hand, I done it ter save yer life."

"Thunder! that's so," exclaimed Nate; "I musn't fergit that. Thank ye fer 'mindin' me of it."

Springing down, the old guide soon found his lost weapon, and as soon as he had climbed back to his place, the stage rolled on.

Night was now settling down, and as the stage descended toward the entrance to the canyon the shadows began to grow quite dark.

Big Gid did not urge his mules, but allowed them to make their own gait, and the sure-footed brutes trotted along freely.

In a short time the walls of the canyon seemingly sprung up on each side, and in another moment the darkness was intense.

The stage now proceeded at a slow pace, for, unable to see anything, the driver had to use caution.

The party kept up a continued flow of conversation, of course, the chief subject of which was their recent adventure and humiliation, but we need not set it forth here. The women were certainly frightened, and, while they tried to laugh at it all as a good joke, they no doubt secretly wished themselves safely back to New York.

One thing had been noticed, and that was that Twilight Charlie had used good language, showing conclusively that he was not uneducated. And this only added to the mystery that surrounded him, and served to pique the curiosity of his victims—especially the three young women.

They were now near their destination, but still another adventure was in store for them.

About midway of the canyon was an almost abrupt bend, and right here began a narrower branch-canyon that wound away to the northward. The general course of the main canyon was northwest to southeast to this point, and from here it ran almost directly south.

When the stage came to this point, a bright light flashed suddenly into the driver's face, a light from a powerful bull's-eye lantern, and in its glare was plainly seen the hand of a man grasping a large revolver. And with the light, and the sight of the deadly weapon, came simultaneously the stern command, accompanied with horrible oaths:

"Whoa! Hands up, there, or you'll have to chaw lead!"

Big Gid again brought the stage to a sudden stop and raised his hands. So did the others, even Nebraska Nate.

With the light full upon him, and the leveled revolver in plain sight, its barrel gleaming like polished silver, Nate saw that it would be sure death to attempt resistance.

For a few seconds nothing could be seen but the powerful light and the steady weapon, but ere their eyes became more accustomed to the glare, the travelers made out the figure of a man on horseback.

Man and horse were inky black, and the man was masked—not with a half-face mask, but with one that covered his face completely, so that recognition was impossible at any time, day or night. His hands, too, were hid from sight in a pair of black gloves.

This was Sulphur Sam, mounted upon his famous horse—Black Satan.

"Up they be, Samuel," cried Big Gid, "so thar's no need for any bleed ter be let out."

"So much th' better fer you, then," the outlaw returned; "and see that you keep 'em so, too."

If the ladies of the party had been frightened before, they were more so now. This man's words sent thrills of horror over them, and they trembled for their lives.

"Now, you insiders, bundle out of there," Sulphur Sam ordered, "and be lightnin' quick about it, too. And be sure you don't try on any Tom Fool game, or I'll drop you in your tracks. I'm in no humor for fooling."

Colonel Featherstone pushed open the door of the stage, saying:

"All right, we'll get out, so no need for any shooting."

"Out with you, then, and lively."

The colonel alighted, and then helped out the girls.

"Ha! some ladies, eh?" the outlaw exclaimed, as he turned his lantern upon them.

He turned the light first upon Pansy Mayflower, then upon Frances Featherstone, and soon upon Myra Sheldon. The latter seemed to interest him particularly, for he allowed the light to rest upon her face for some moments.

Then he roused up to business.

"All out?" he demanded.

"All but my wife," answered the colonel, "and she is an invalid. I hope you will allow her to remain seated."

"I said *all* out," the outlaw snapped.

"Oh! sir, she is ill; please let her remain," urged Frances.

"It is indeed true," enjoined Miss Sheldon, "and I hope you will not compel her to alight."

Again did Sulphur Sam turn the light of his lantern upon Myra's pretty face.

"Upon your request, and to oblige you," he said, gallantly, "she may remain inside the stage, fair lady."

"Thank you," said Myra, and, knowing—or feeling—that the eyes of the outlaw were upon her, the warm blood mounted to her face and she turned away her head.

"I hope you'll pardon my rough talk, ladies," Sulphur Sam then said; "I was not aware that you were aboard. I am sorry to put you to any trouble, but a man of business cannot stop at points of politeness, so, one and all, please pony out your wealth. Business is business, you know, and my business is to collect toll on the highways and byways of Colorado."

"We would like to oblige you, you impudent rascal!" exclaimed Colonel Featherstone, "but as we have been already robbed, we have nothing left."

"You're not very complimentary in your ad-

dress, you old sinner!" returned Sam, "but you can lie like sin. That story is too old. Come, now, hand out your boodle, and so save your friends the trouble of burying you."

"What th' colonel says is gospel, Mister Samuel," confirmed Big Gid. "Ain't it so, pardner?" to Nebraska Nate.

"It be," Nate assured.

"Do you mean to say that you've already paid toll?" demanded the road-agent in a tone of incredulity.

"We have, fer sartin," Big Gid answered. "We've been robbed of everything but hide, ha'r, an' boots, an' if ye don't believe it ye're welcome ter s'arch us an' satisfy yerself on th' p'int."

"By heavens, I will!" Sulphur Sam exclaimed. "This is an old dodge, and I wouldn't take the word of my grandmother in such a case. Be careful to keep your hands well up, now, every one, to save trouble."

As he spoke, the outlaw reached up and placed his lantern upon a point of rock, so that its light fell upon the stage. Then he slipped from his horse, and, holding the bride over his left arm, advanced to where his victims were standing.

As man and horse came out into the glare of the light, they made a striking picture. Sulphur Sam was clad in black from crown to toe, and Black Satan, his horse, was as black as polished ebony.

As Twilight Charlie had done, Sulphur Sam chose Colonel Featherstone for his first prey.

He invited the colonel to step forward from the group, an order that he obeyed. Then the outlaw proceeded to search him.

But search was useless, of course. He could find nothing of value.

"Curse the luck!" he exclaimed in anger. "If I find this is a put-up job, you'll be sorry for it, you bet!"

"Oh! but it is th' gospel truth," averred Big Gid. "You won't find a dollar in th' hull crowd of us, I opine."

"You hold your jaw," was the command.

"Sartinly," said the driver, and he lapsed into silence.

Harold Featherstone was the next one ordered to step forward, and he had to submit to the indignity as humbly as had his worthy sire.

But the result was the same.

The outlaw did not give up, though, but searched every one in the party, except two, before he said another word. The exceptions were Mrs. Featherstone, who had not got out of the stage; and Miss Shelden. And it might easily have been noted that he used far greater caution in dealing with Big Gid and Nebraska Nate than with the others. In fact he took the precaution to disarm them all, tossing their weapons upon the ground.

"Well, by thunder!" he exclaimed, "I begin to believe you told the truth. To make a sure thing, however, I'll search the stage. Stand back a little, please."

All being now disarmed, the outlaw could move without fear, and it took him but a short time to examine the inside of the stage and the driver's box. The baggage he did not interfere with.

"Fooled, by great!" he finally cried. "You have either told a straight story, or else you have beat me at my own game. Say, where and when were you stopped?"

"It war not ten minutes ago, right up thar at th' top o' th' hill," answered the driver. "We thought it war you, but it seems it wasn't."

"Then you don't know who it was?"

"No. He is a stranger heurabouts, so he said, an' he calls himself—er—What wur th' handle he giv us, pardner?" to Nebraska Nate.

"Hang me if it ain't slipped out o' my think-p'an," Nate answered.

"It was 'Twilight Charlie,' was it not?" Harold Featherstone reminded.

"That war it," Nate and Gid at once affirmed.

"Never heard of him," said Sam. "I'll attend to him, though, if he intends to run in on my territory, that is sure. There isn't room enough for two of us here."

"He ruther opines that he's come ter stay, though," said Big Gid.

"He does, eh; we'll see about that. What did he say?"

"Why, he allowed that you was havin' things too much your own way 'round heur, an' that he'd have ter have a share of the good things hisself," answered the driver.

"Ha, ha, ha!" Sulphur Sam laughed, "that is a good one. But, I guess he will change his mind when we meet. Well," he added, "I must be going. Before I depart, however, there is something I would say to you, fair lady," addressing Miss Shelden, "if you will step this way for one moment."

"You can have nothing to say to me, sir," retorted the spirited Myra, "and I do not care to step that way."

"Then," remarked the outlaw, "you must allow me to step to you," and suiting action to the words, he did so, and, before any one could guess his intention, he caught the girl in his arm and drew her to him, and gave her a hasty kiss through his mask.

CHAPTER IV.

A MAN IN A HOLE.

It was done so quickly that no one could interfere to prevent, but all were ready to resent it.

"You cur!" cried Harold Featherstone, and, regardless of the consequence, he sprang forward to strike the bold rascal to the earth.

Lucian Alanson and Colonel Featherstone did the same, but the two Westerners of the party were more prudent. They, however, took advantage of the move and sprang to regain possession of their weapons.

But Sulphur Sam was too quick for them all. He had released the young lady instantly, no doubt expecting an attack, and stepped back.

"Hold!" he cried, presenting his revolver at Harold's head. "Stop, or you die. I have done no harm to the lady. It was a temptation I could not resist."

The young men were obliged to halt.

At the same instant, as near as may be, the quick eyes of the outlaw caught sight of Big Gid and Nebraska Nate in the act of picking up their weapons, and he instantly turned his revolver upon them and fired.

Big Gid fell forward upon his face, hit, and Nate leaped to cover behind the stage, he having snatched up one of the revolvers.

This, too, the road-agent saw, and turning instantly, he fired a shot at the lantern, thus plunging the whole scene into darkness intense.

Then he sprang upon his horse, wheeled about, and the next moment the hoof-strokes of the animal were heard ringing away up through the narrow canyon that led toward the north.

Well did the rascal know his danger when Nebraska Nate, with a revolver in hand, broke away from the cover of his weapon.

But Nate could take no advantage of his position, for, darkness following instantly, he could not shoot without danger of hitting some one of the party.

"Ha, ha, ha!" rung out Sam's taunting laugh, as he sped away. "I did not gather in any boodle, my friends, but I stole a kiss from the prettiest girl in this State."

"And you'll pay for it, too," thundered Colonel Featherstone.

"Will I?" was the retort; "we will see."

"And with your life!" cried Harold.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

A groan from Big Gid drew attention to him, and while all were busy trying to get a light, the sound of the outlaw's horse's hoof-strokes died away in the distance.

The stage had been provided with a lamp, but it had become lost, and to make a light without the proper means was not easy. This was the reason why the stage had ventured into the canyon without a light in the first place.

After a little time they succeeded in finding the lamp which the road-agent had left behind him in his hasty flight. The glass was broken, of course, but the bullet had done no further damage to the lamp than to bend it out of shape a little.

By this means they were soon enabled to see what they were doing.

Big Gid was found sitting up on the ground, holding his head between his hands, and his face and hands were covered with blood.

Nebraska Nate went to him at once to learn how badly he was hurt, while Colonel Featherstone and the young women turned their attention to Mrs. Featherstone, who had again fainted.

To men and women of the West, this little excitement would hardly have been noticed; but to the strangers from the East it was nothing short of horrible.

The old guide soon found that the driver was not badly hurt. By rare chance, the bullet had merely touched his head with force enough to knock him senseless, cutting the scalp for a few inches.

Harold and Lucian joined Nate.

"Is he badly wounded?" Harold asked.

"Wal, no," answered Nate, "not so bad but it mought be wuss. It was a mighty close call fer him."

"You kin bet high it war," the driver agreed, faintly, "but I'm worth a good many dead men yet. Jest help me to my feet an' tie up my head, an' I reckon I'll come out O. K."

They lifted him up and bandaged his head as well as possible under the circumstances, and in a few minutes he had almost recovered his powers of mind and body.

It had been a "close call" indeed, for Sulphur Sam seldom missed his man when he shot to kill, as he undoubtedly had done in this case.

After some trouble Mrs. Featherstone was brought out of her faint again, but the great excitement was now telling upon her, and she was almost prostrated. If the women had been frightened by Twilight Charlie, their second adventure frightened them a great deal more.

As soon as possible the party prepared to start on.

The ladies resumed their places in the stage, the men recovered their weapons and did the same, and Big Gid was just on the point of starting when a scared voice called out:

"Mister Driver! Ho! Mister Driver!"

The voice was one of mingled distress and terror, as near as it can be described.

"Whoop!" cried Gideon, drawing up on his lines and pushing down on the brake. "I wonder what in th' name o' snakes an' toads has broke loose now."

"Ho! Mister Driver!" called the voice again.

"Wal, what's a-chawin' ye?" Nebraska Nate demanded.

"I am here in a hole, gentlemen," was the reply. "Will you not kindly assist me to get out?"

The voice seemed to come from the direction of the narrower canyon, and the one who spoke was evidently not far away.

"Wal, who be ye an' whar be ye?" Nate questioned again, sharply.

"My name is Chauncey DeBrown, and I am from the East. You may have heard me playing a cornet a short time ago."

"Yes, we heard you," said Harold Featherstone.

"Glad you did, sir: it will make it easier for me to introduce myself. You know that a man who has a soul for music cannot be a bad man, and my soul runs to music to a wonderful degree."

"You handle the cornet very well," said Lucian Alanson.

"Thank you. But, good people, please help me out of my present dilemma, and allow me to ride to Legs-of-the-Pot with you, and as we go along, with your permission, I will tell you all about my mishap."

"You mean to Pot Leg, don't you?" asked Colonel Featherstone.

"Ah! yes, so it is. I get the name mixed. Very peculiar name it is, anyhow. I never heard of such names until I came to the West."

"I agree with him perfectly," said Frances Featherstone aside.

"But, good people," the unfortunate requested again; "won't you please be kind enough to help me out? I assure you I am in a most uncomfortable situation."

"We must see who he is," decided Harold, "and do what we can for him. It will never do to leave him here."

"To be sure we must," Big Gid agreed. "You take th' light, pard," to Nate, "an' see what ye kin find."

Nebraska Nate took the broken lantern, got down from the box, and started toward the point from where the voice had seemed to come, the two young men following.

Turning into the narrower canyon, they looked all around carefully, but no signs of a human being could they find.

"Whar in tarnation be ye?" Nebraska Nate demanded.

"Right here, my good friend," was the reply, and it seemed to come from the very wall of the canyon.

"Right whar?" demanded Nate, as he looked all around once more. "Haug me if I kin see hide or boots of ye."

"Look this way—look to your left, and you will learn where I am."

The three men did so, and, true enough, beheld the object of their search.

Just there was a big crack in the wall of the canyon, a crack, or crevice, that extended back and downward, and in it, with his head just on a level with the ground, stood a young man.

He was, perhaps, twenty-five years of age, and not at all bad-looking. He had, though, a rather pale and effeminate face, and appeared to be altogether out of place in that wild country.

All that could be seen of him was his head, and had the hole been a trifle deeper, the head, too, would have been out of sight.

How had he come there?

"Wal," said Nate, on beholding him, "you be in a sort of bad box, young feller, hang me if you hain't. How in th' name o' wonders did ye come ter git thar?"

"Please help me out, my friend; then you shall hear all. But first, please take my horn," and he handed up his cornet; then Harold and Nate pulled the young man out of the hole.

He proved to be a tall and slim individual, and was clad in a peculiar-looking costume—a cross between the lawn tennis absurdity and a hunting-suit. His hat was one of the round, flat nothings called polo caps; his coat and vest would have served admirably for a duck-shooting excursion; his trousers were the abbreviated articles known as knee-breeches; and below them came a pair of heavy stockings and canvas shoes.

"My dear, good friends!" he exclaimed gratefully, catching hold of his rescuers' hands, "how can I ever thank you?"

"Thar's no need fer any thanks, I reckon," answered Nate, disgustedly, as he viewed the nondescript.

"And will you allow me to ride to town with you?"

"Certainly; come right along."

CHAPTER V.

MR. DEBROWN'S STORY.

THEY returned to the stage, the stranger took a place on top with Harold and Lucian, and they started on.

"I venture ter guess," Nebraska Nate then remarked, "that Sulphur Sam had somethin' ter do wi' th' fix we found you in, stranger."

"And you guess aright, sir," was the reply. "I will tell you all about it."

"Sartinly," said Big Gid; "go right ahead."

"In the first place, let me tell you a little more about myself, and why I am here. My name, as I have already told you, is Chauncey DeBrown, and I am from Boston. I have means, and I have come out here partly for pleasure, and partly to blow my horn. Indeed, I may as well say I am here for pleasure solely, for nothing gives me more pleasure than blowing my horn."

"An' you ain't no slouch of a blower, neither, I should say," remarked Big Gid.

"Thank you, sir. I flatter myself that I can play pretty well, and my whole soul is in it. I only wish that all men could appreciate good playing. I will not attempt to say how many good boarding-houses I have been turned away from, all on account of my cornet, and it is really alarming to note how many persons there are, good, well-meaning, well-informed persons, too, who have no music in their souls. Really, I pity them. They do not know what they miss. And cultured Boston seems to have no soul for music at all, and that, among other reasons, is why I came out here. My last landlady, who seemed to like me very well, advised me to take my horn and go to the Rocky Mountains, where, she assured me, I could give my genius full sway and blow to my heart's content, without danger of offending unappreciating ears."

"No doubt she was right," remarked Harold. "It may be so," said Mr. DeBrown, "but at first the proposition rather startled me. 'Why, madam,' said I, 'what of the Indians?' 'Oh!' said she, 'there are no Indians there now, at least no wild ones, I believe; and if there are, music, you know, is said to be potent to soothe the savage breast.'"

"Good reasoning, certainly," observed Lucian.

"So I thought. At any rate I resolved to take the advice, and here I am."

"But, stranger," remarked Nebraska Nate, "you don't come to th' pint as ter how ye got inter yer diffikilty."

"Ah! pardon me, my friend; I will come to that at once. I have been out here for some weeks now, but only recently made my way to the tow of Pan Lid—I mean Pot Leg. And I am well pleased with the town, too. Here no one finds any fault with my cornet, and I am happy. I can wander out into the hills and play to my heart's satisfaction. And that accounts for my being out to-night."

"But th' pint, stranger, th' pint," urged Big Gid.

"Yes, I will come to that at once. During my short time here I have made the discovery that in this canyon there is a most remarkable echo, and I delight to come here in the early evening and play. Well, I came here to-night as usual, for it is night here almost before the sun is down, you know; and I was playing away merrily, when of a sudden a rough hand fell upon my shoulder, and a pistol was pressed against my head."

"Ruther made ye jump. I reckon," observed Nebraska Nate with a laugh.

"Made me jump!" exclaimed the young man; "I should say it did. I was really startled. And at the same instant a powerful light was flashed into my face, and I found I was in the hands of a masked robber. I had been playing away as loud as I could, and had not heard a sound."

"What did ye say to him?" asked Big Gid.

"Good sir," said I, "take all I have, if that be your intention, but spare me my horn." And he did so. He took my watch and chain, and the little money I had with me, but said I might keep my tooter, as the coarse creature called it."

"Quite generous," observed Harold Featherstone.

"So I thought myself," declared the young man, "for what would I be without my cornet? Life would not be worth living. Well, just after he had robbed me we heard the stage coming, and the robber clapped his pistol to my head again and threatened to kill me if I so much as winked. I readily promised that I would not do so."

"An' that war good fer yer health. A pound o' prevention is worth a good many ounces o' cure, any day," was Big Gid's sapient observation.

"Well," the young man resumed, "I will tell you what happened next. The outlaw pressed his weapon against my head, as I have said, and hissed: 'If you so much as wink you are a dead man. Come with me. I have a little business to transact with the coming stage, and I want to put you in a safe place where you will be out of all danger. Come right along.' Of course I went. He led me to the place where you found me, let me look into the hole, and then ordered me to get down into it. 'Good sir,' said I. 'I can't—really I can't.' 'It will save me the trouble of killing you and then throwing you in,' said he. I got in at once. 'Now,' said he, 'see that you stay right there, and do not attempt to get out.'"

"An' you stayed," observed Nebraska Nate.

"I did. I remained there for two reasons. One reason was that I was afraid to disobey the outlaw's order, and the other was that I could not get out when I did try. Then it was that I called to you for help."

His hearers all laughed heartily, and so did Mr. DeBrown, taking it all in good part. He was certainly an original character.

The stage now came out of the canyon, and the lights of Pot Leg and Empire Camp were seen gleaming a short distance ahead.

"Heur we be at last," said Big Gid, and he swung out his long whip and started the mules forward at a livelier gait.

The canyon had terminated suddenly in a beautiful little valley, a valley that was inclosed all around by grim and rugged old mountains, and through which the Little Snake River flowed peacefully along on its journey to the Yampah.

Pot Leg was a goodly sized settlement and its lights were numerous. Beyond them were the lights of the camp.

"Give 'em a toot of yer horn, Mister DeBrown," suggested Nebraska Nate, "ter let 'em know we're a-comin'."

"DeBrown, if you please," the young man corrected.

"Beg yer pardon, sir," returned Nate, "but I always was a bad one fer mixin' up names. I don't reckon it makes a powerful sight o' difference what sort o' borderin' I put on, so long as I got th' main color all right."

"Merely a correction," remarked Mr. DeBrown, as he picked up his cornet, "merely a correction. It will give me pleasure to do as asked, I assure you," and he raised the horn to his lips.

The blast that followed was almost deafening. The others did wonder that some people had, seemingly, no soul for music.

At a distance, however, it sounded all right, and the citizens of the town came out in a body to see the stage arrive.

They had been expecting it, and the moment they heard the horn they knew what was coming. They had heard the young man play his cornet often enough to be familiar with that, but this seemed to be a genuine stage horn, and one that was well played, too.

Out they came, everybody and his neighbors, and as the stage whirled into town they gave a ringing cheer.

Those on top of the stage waved their hats in response, but the stage did not stop. Instead, it continued right on to its destination—Empire Camp.

After it went the crowd, cheering and shouting, and when it stopped at the camp the crowd pressed around to see the strangers.

The buildings of the camp were ablaze with lights, and lights shone from every tent, for, as stated, Col. Featherstone's servants had already arrived, and everything was in readiness for the tired travelers.

"Welcome ter Pot Leg!" shouted the crowd, as the party were getting out, "an' three cheers fer th' wimmen!"

The cheers were given with a will, and the ladies bowed and waved their hands in response.

Col. Featherstone got up on the box of the stage and thanked the citizens for their hearty welcome, and expressed the hope that his party, one and all, would be favored with the good will and friendship of every person in the place.

These were readily promised, and then amid more cheering the party entered the main building of their temporary home, where they found supper awaiting them.

Mr. DeBrown was asked to partake of their first dinner with them, but he politely declined, saying that as he was not then presentable for the table he would defer the honor until some future time.

As soon as the baggage was carried in, Big Gid drove back to Pot Leg proper and the crowd dispersed, leaving the strangers to peace and quiet.

All were hungry, and lost no time in getting to the table.

The repast at length ended, all were about to leave the table, when they were suddenly startled by a great shouting, instantly followed by a number of pistol-shots in quick succession. What could be the trouble now? Had they not seen excitement enough for one night?

CHAPTER VI.

A CYCLONE IN TOWN.

THE women of the party hastened into an inner room, closing the door after them, while Colonel Featherstone, Harold, and Lucian, went out to learn what was going on.

And they were just in time to see the fun.

Down the valley at break-neck speed came a horseman, who could be dimly seen in the semi-lighted street, and as he came he shouted at the top of his voice and fired shot after shot from a pair of revolvers.

Out of saloons, stores, and houses, poured the citizens of Pot Leg, and more than one man sent a shot flying after the wild rider.

On the horseman came, and in a moment more he was at Empire Camp.

"Whoop! Whoop—whoop—whoop!" he yelled. "Clear the road for Sulphur Sam, the great blizzard of the woolly West! Whoop—whoop! Make room for Black Satan and his master, and plenty of it! Might as well try to stop a double-headed cyclone! Clear the road, or we'll have to do it ourselves! Whoop—whoop—whoop!"

On he came and on he went, like the very wind. And as he passed the camp he fired another volley from his revolvers, using both hands while the horse was running at its highest speed.

After came the crowd, now blazing away almost regardlessly, and the bullets were sent flying after him thick and fast.

Colonel Featherstone and the two young men quickly drew back out of range.

"What a dare-devil that man is!" the colonel exclaimed.

"I would give a fortune for his horse," declared Lucian, who had a passion for fine horses.

The daring outlaw had entered the valley from the north, had passed right through the town, and following the course of the river, had made good his escape into the surrounding mountains.

It was useless to follow him, and no one attempted to do so.

Gradually the excitement subsided, and the citizens of Pot Leg again retired to their own end of the valley.

Quiet soon reigned, and an hour later the little camp was wrapped in slumber.

At Pot Leg, however, it was far too early for any one to think of seeking his bed, and the town was wide awake.

Thither Nebraska Nate and Big Gid had turned their steps.

The leading saloon of the town was the Bobtail Flush, and to that place the two turned their steps.

The Bobtail Flush was owned by one Sherman Mansfield, a mine-owner at Pot Leg, and was managed for him by a man named Howard Lang.

Lang was a big fellow, who enjoyed the reputation of having at one time been a prize-fighter. Whether this was true or not is hard to say, but on the strength of that claim he ruled the saloon with an iron hand, and the worst characters of the town stood in awe of him.

But Pot Leg was not such a bad place, and its saloons, as a rule, were quite orderly. Once in a while, however, the hard cases of some neighboring town would come there to paint everything red; then the citizens would rise up in their might and there would be a red-hot time.

And on such occasions Pot Leg generally captured the laurel.

When Nate and Gid entered the saloon they found it well filled and were welcomed heartily.

Everybody wanted to learn something about the strangers at the Camp, and about the women in particular.

"Hello!" exclaimed Lang, as he rested his elbows on the bar and surveyed the old scout and the driver, "what sort o' colony have ye started down thar?"

"Hello to yerself an' see how ye like it," returned Big Gid, good-naturedly. "We have brought ye a party o' as square white men as ye ever see. Ain't that so, pardner?" turning to Nebraska Nate.

"You kin bet high that it is," the old scout returned. "They're tender 'bout th' feet yet, but as soon as that wears off a leetle I reckon they'll pan out all right. If th' citizens o' Pot Leg uses 'em half white, ye'll find 'em made o' th' right stuff, I reckon."

"An' that is what we expect to do," observed Sherman Mansfield, who chanced to be present.

"That's all they asks," said Nate, "and that's all they expects. They've showed that they trust to th' honor o' th' town by comin' heur, an' I reckon they're ready ter meet ye half-way every time."

"No doubt of that," Mansfield agreed. "Who are the ladies of the party?" he inquired. "Are they all married?"

"Nary a one of 'em, except th' old one," replied Nate.

"All brothers and sisters?"

"Bless ye, no! I reckon they're sort o' half-way sweethearts all around. Ther colonel has a son an' a darter thar, an' th' others is invited friends. Leastways that's th' way I understand it. An' then thar's that leetle gal, th' best-lookin' one o' th' hull lot ter n'y way o' thinkin'; she's th' only one that don't seem ter be paired off with anybody."

"Who is she?" asked Mansfield.

"Why," replied Nate, "she is a sort o' handy gal to wait on Miss Featherstone an' her friend, it seems. They call her Pansy Mayflower."

"That is rather a flowery name!" observed Mansfield. "She ought to be sweet and pretty, too."

"I know she's purty," declared Nate, "an' I haven't th' least doubt her bein' sweet. She's a real leetle lady, every inch of her."

"I guess I shall have to try and make her acquaintance."

"I can't blame ye fer it if ye do," returned

Nate. "You'll find 'em all as fine a lot o' folks as ye ever met, an' I'm a-bettin' on it."

"How long do you expect to stay with them?"

"I'm booked fer th' hull season," the guide replied.

These questions and a great many more were asked, not only by Mansfield, but by several others.

Nebraska Nate returned civil and friendly answers to all, and he and Big Gid got along swimmingly.

While they were talking, Chauncey DeBrown entered the saloon with his cornet under his arm. He was immediately greeted with a cheer, and was requested to play. It was not his first visit there.

Going to the end of the room, he mounted a chair and proceeded to comply with the request. And he had an appreciative audience.

He had not been playing long when a stranger entered the place. He was a big, burly-looking fellow, with red hair and beard, and eyes that were bloodshot and wild in expression. He was clearly a hard drinker, and evidently had a little of the fiery element aboard now.

He stood and glared around for a few moments, listening to the music and perhaps debating in his mind where he should begin to start a little excitement; and while he stood there another stranger entered.

This one was a young man of twenty-eight or thereabouts, of medium height and splendid figure, and fairly good-looking. He was modestly dressed, but had the air of a gentleman sport who was fully capable of taking care of number one. He sauntered into the room in a leisurely way, and stopped and leaned carelessly against the bar to listen to the cornet.

Barely had he stopped there when stranger number one—he of the red hair and beard—started in to do something. Lifting up his arms and throwing back his head, he bawled:

"Ya-a-ah! Heur l be, th' six-foot terror from th' head-waters. Want ter hear me howl? Wa-a-a-gh! Yow yow-ow! Whoop! Oh, I'm a screamin' blizzard from th' up range, I be, an' don't ye fergit it! Ya-a-a-ah!"

"Shut up!" exclaimed a dozen voices at once.

"What! you tell me ter shut up?" the red-head demanded fiercely; "guess ye don't know me purty well. Guess ye never heard tell o' Triangle Thomas, did ye? That's me, every time! I'm th' three-cornered cyclone from th' howlin' wilderness, I be, an' ye don't want ter let it slip yer mind. Yow-ow-ow!"

"Hold your noise!" was the general cry. "No one can hear!"

"Wa-a-a-gh! it can't be did! When Triangle Thomas gits onto th' rampage thar's no stoppin' him. Who-o-ooop! d'ye hear me chirp? That's me, you bet!" and the blowing bully waved his arms about defiantly.

At this stage of the game Sherman Mansfield signaled to his manager, Lang, to take a hand.

This Lang was preparing to do anyhow, and he now passed around from behind the bar to "do up" the blower.

CHAPTER VII.

TAMING THE WHIRLWIND.

EVERYBODY in the Bobtail Flush expected now to see some fun. They knew that the manager of the place was a pretty good man in a fight, and they looked for him to take the blower by the ear and lead him out of doors without any ceremony about it; but just as the manager passed around the end of the bar a peculiar accident happened to him. At the end of the bar lay a dog, and turning in haste, he did not see it until too late, and striking his foot against it he was sent sprawling out upon the floor with fearful force.

"Haw, haw, haw!" roared the three-cornered whirlwind; "what yer tryin' ter do? Kin it be possible that you was comin' fer me? If ye was, that fall was th' luckiest thing that could 'a' happened to ye. I'd 'a' done ye up so quick ye wouldn't been able ter remember yer own name. Haw, haw, haw!"

At first it was not thought that Lang's fall could be anything serious, but when he did not get up, after some moments, two or three men sprung forward to his assistance.

Then it was found that in falling he had struck his head against the leg of a table with force enough to render him insensible.

Mansfield kicked the dog out of the room, and then directed that Lang should be carried into an inner room where he could be cared for.

"And now my brawling friend," he said, addressing the bully. "I want you to shut right up or get out of here just as quick as you can. Do you understand?"

"An' what if I don't see fit ter do either one?" the man demanded in a stubborn tone. "You jest tend to your own business, mister, an' I'll tend to mine. Who-o-ooop! Don't tread on th' pet corns o' Triangle Thomas, mister, unless ye want th' hull cage o' wild animals turned loose 'round heur. I'm wuss'n a can o' dynamite when ye touch me off, an' I tear things up jest awful ter see. Pray don't git me ter goin', mister, fer I tell ye honest I don't think thar'd be enough left o' this shebang

ter start a fire with. You've no idea what a rip-snortin' old war-horse I am. Who-o-ooop!"

As he concluded, the self-styled terror from the head-waters brandished his big fists in a most threatening manner and glared around him as though he was seeking for a world or two to conquer.

"That's all right," said Mansfield, "but I want you to shut right up or else get out of this saloon. Now I don't want to have to speak to you again."

"Wal, don't do it, then," the howling blizzard retorted; "ye needn't speak ter me unless ye want to, I'm sure. You jest tend to yer own biz, mister, an' thar won't be no bad blood atween us. Jest let Triangle Tommy have his own sweet way, mister, an' he'll be one o' th' best boys in th' famby."

Mansfield did not seem to want to get into any fight with the man, so he retired behind the bar, hoping, no doubt, that the fellow would soon get tired of blowing and go and sit down.

But in that hope he was mistaken, for the fellow seemed to take it as proof that Mansfield was afraid of him, and became more noisy than ever.

"Whoop-ety-whoop! Yow yow! Wa-a-a-gh!" he yelled, as he wheeled around on one heel and brandished his arms again. "I'm th' striped zebra from th' wild lands, I be, an' don't fail ter keep it in mind. I kin kick furdur, run higher, an' jump faster than any other galoot in this heur burg. I kin, an' I'm bettin' rocks on it. Whoop!"

"You had better take my advice and keep still," the proprietor of the place warned, and he moved toward the end of the bar as Lang had done.

"An' you take my advice an' don't interfere w' me," the blusterer, retorted. "I know what I'm a-doin', I do, an' I know how ter do it. Say, young feller," he called out, turning to DeBrown, "let me have that 'ar horn o' yours, will ye? I can't make half noise enough with my mouth, an' I think I could jest make that thing talk. Come, pass it right over heur, my son, an' hear yer uncle toot it. I'll bet I kin make it hum."

"My good sir," the young man objected, "I never lend my cornet to any one. I hope you will not take offense, but I cannot do it, really."

"What! d'ye mean ter say ye won't do it?" the red-head yelled; "we'll see 'bout that leetle thing, I guess."

As he spoke, the man advanced toward where DeBrown was standing.

"Hand that thing right over to yer uncle," he ordered, "an' save me th' trouble o' takin' it away from ye. Say, d'ye hear!"

"But, my dear sir," the young man protested, "it will never do, you know."

"An' why won't it do?"

"You might damage it, you know."

"Damage notin'! Don't ye s'pose I kin blow a horn?"

"That is not it. I prefer not to lend it. I will play anything you want me to, but I cannot let you have it."

Mansfield had now come out again from behind the bar, and was preparing to take a hand in the affair.

But there was another present who had the same intention.

This was the young man who had entered the saloon shortly after the bully had made his appearance, and who until now had been standing with his elbow on the bar, a quiet spectator of what was going on.

The latter motioned to Mansfield to let him have the floor, and Mansfield did not require much pressing to do so.

Who this young man was, no one knew.

He made his way slowly toward the "terror," and stopped a few steps behind him.

"Young feller," the red-head demanded, "hand me that 'ar horn! I don't want ter kill ye right whar ye stand, but I reckon I'll have ter do somethin' awful if ye don't hurry up about it. Ya-a-a-ah!"

DeBrown drew back as far as the wall would permit and still resisted, while he looked hopelessly around for some one to come to his rescue.

To all appearances, though, no one seemed very anxious to enter the lists against the Triangle.

"My good friend," DeBrown tried to appease, "please do—"

"Wa-a-a-gh!" the cyclone screamed, with force enough to scare a timid man, "give me that 'ar horn, boy, or I'll wring yer nose off!"

"Will you promise not to damage it?" the owner asked, seeing that he would no doubt have to yield.

"Promise nothin'!" the red-head yelled; "hand it heur!"

As he made the demand this time his hand fell to his hip in a threatening manner, and the horn was extended toward him.

"Here it is," said DeBrown, very reluctantly, "and I trust to your honor not to do it harm."

The great blizzard put out his huge paw to take it, but before he could do so a heavy hand fell upon his shoulder, and he was whirled around like a loose button on a barn floor.

And the owner of that hand was the young stranger.

As soon as the warrior bold stopped turning, he glared around him in a dazed sort of way to learn who had served him thus.

"Who done that?" he bawled.

"I did it," answered the young stranger.

The man looked at him in amazement.

"You don't mean ter tell me it was you that yanked me around in that style, do ye?" he demanded.

"It was no one else, I assure you," was the reply.

"An' what did ye do it for?" the blower asked.

"Because you needed some one to bring you to your senses," was the cool reply.

"Ou! I did, did I?" the blizzard sneered.

"An' you took it on yerself ter do it, did ye?"

"I did, sir; and if necessary I can do it again."

"I don't know you, youngster, an' I reckon you don't know me; but all th' same I'm goin' ter lick ye ez bad ez if I was yer daddy."

"Well, step right up and begin, for when I'm promised a good thing I hate to be kept waitin'."

"You're too mighty fresh, d'ye know that? What did you want ter chip in on my deal fer?"

"Because you were making a nuisance of yourself and needed some one to take you down a little. If this gentleman did not want to lend you his horn, why did you not let that settle it? I do not blame him any, for you smell like an old bourbon barrel and your breath would corrode the instrument so that it would never play again."

The striped zebra listened in open-mouthed amazement. He could hardly believe that he heard aright.

Everybody laughed, and that roused the fellow's anger to the highest pitch.

"Wa-a-a-gh!" red-head yelled, "ther great an' only Triangle Thomas is on th' war-path now, fer sartain. Clear ther road, unless ye want ter git struck by lightnin'. I'm sorry ter do it, young feller, but you have brought it all onto yerself an' so you will have ter take what follers. You jest stand right thar, my musical friend," addressing Mr. DeBrown, "and I'll play that horn jest ez soon ez I polish this feller off. Whoop!"

With that wild yell the blower sprung forward with uplifted arms, and aimed a blow at the sport's face, but the young fellow stepped nimbly aside, and the blow missed him. And then, before the great cyclone could recover himself, the sport was at him like a wildcat. Right and left he let him have it, knocking him clear across the room and doubling him up in a heap at last under one of the tables.

The yell that went up was almost deafening.

The screaming whirlwind straightened himself out, presently, and looking out from under the table in the most ludicrous way imaginable, inquired:

"Say, is th' y'arthquake over?"

CHAPTER VIII.

WARNING FROM BOOT HEEL.

THE crowd in the Bobtail Flush fairly laughed itself hoarse.

Howard Lang had come to, and he came out into the room just in time to see the knock-down.

"Bully for you, sport!" he exclaimed. "That was well done."

"Wasn't it, though?" cried Nebraska Nate.

"I never see'd a more bootiful tumble in my life."

"It was a darling, an' no mistake 'bout that," agreed Big Gid.

"Are you satisfied, my red-headed terror?" asked the sport, as he crossed the room to the table under which the knocked-out blizzard reclined.

Triangle Thomas had evidently decided that the earthquake was over, for he slowly crawled out from under the table and got up.

"Want some more?" asked the sport, in a bantering tone.

The giant shook himself together, so to say, and then thundered:

"Wa-a-a-gh! Triangle Thomas ain't done up yet, not by a big sight! Ye took me that time when I wasn't lookin'. One knock-down don't lose th' fight, nary time. Heur I be, jest ez fresh an' bootiful ez ever. Yow-ow-ow!"

Putting up his arms he began to dance about and spar at the sport in the wildest kind of way, and his appearance was ferocious enough to have frightened a man who had not the utmost confidence in his own prowess.

But the sport looked coolly at the enraged braggart, his arms in the most careless position imaginable, and allowed him to come as near as he desired.

This show of utter carelessness rather disconcerted the great Triangle, but forward and back, up and down and around he pranced, pretending to be watching for an opening when everything was clear for him to rush right in.

"Quite a dancer, isn't he," the sport remarked.

The crowd laughed again, and the blower grew redder and hotter than ever.

"Wa-a-gh!" he howled again, "keep yer eye peeled now, fer th' lightnin' is 'bout ter strike. Ye got ther best o' ther great Triangle once, by a foul dodge, but ye want ter bear it in mind that ye can't do it ag'in. Ya-a-a-ah!" and he rushed to the attack.

The young stranger put up his hands in a careless way, and parried every blow with ease. Blow after blow the blusterer sent in, but not one of them took effect. And in a short time he was almost out of breath.

Then the sport began to attack. Out went his left hand first taking the man under the right ear and turning him half-way around, and then out flew his right and set him straight again. Then out went both the left and the right in quick succession, and the "rip-snortin' old war-horse" tumbled heels over head over a table and three or four chairs and brought up standing on his head between another table and the wall.

And as that table was in a corner he could not very well right himself to get out again.

The crowd yelled and hooted until everybody was hoarse, and the cornet-player sounded a blast on his horn.

It was the richest thing the Bobtail Flush had seen in an age.

For some moments the legs of the fallen chief were visible above the table, waving and wiggling convulsively, and then the man succeeded in getting his arms and head free and slipped on down out of sight.

"Thar's been another y'arthquake," observed Nebraska Nate.

"Yas, an' a wuss shock than th' other one was, too," added Big Gid.

"Young man," said Howard Lang, "you're a chief! Whar d'ye hail from?"

"Oh! I'm up from Denver to get a little fresh air," was the reply.

"Well, you're something of a fighter, I don't care where you hail from," was the comment.

"No, I am not much of a fighter," was the modest rejoinder; "it does not require much of a fighter to get away with a man of his stamp."

"I don't know about that," Lang remarked.

"He is big and strong, and a man wants to know how to handle himself pretty well to tackle him. I should hesitate about going for you myself."

The sport smiled but did not make any further comments.

"Whar's th' tremenjus old war-hoss now?" some one called out.

Triangle Thomas was just crawling out from under the table, and Chauncey DeBrown raised his cornet to his lips and played—"Behold the Conquering Hero Comes."

But the great Triangle looked like anything but a conquering hero just then. His nose was broken, his eyes were fast closing up, and his face was smeared all over with blood.

"Been another y'arthquake, hain't ther?" called out Big Gid.

"There has, fer a fact," the vanquished blower acknowledged. "Thar's been a regular old 'ruption somewhar in th' internal regions. Whar's the king-pin that tumbled me over in that style?"

"Here I am, sir," responded the young sport; "can I do anything more for you?"

"Nothin' in that line, I thank ye," the blizzard replied. "What I want is ter take holt o' yer paw an' say that you're a chief. Whar be ye? My eyes is a trifle onsartain jest now. Whar's yer flipper?"

"Here it is, sir," said the young sport, frankly, as he held out his hand to the frightful-looking wretch.

Triangle Thomas took it and shook it heartily.

"Stranger," he observed, "I remarked a short time ago that I didn't know you, an' I reckoned that you didn't know me. I am a leetle better 'quainted w' ye now than I was then. I reckoned that thar wasn't a man in th' hull town o' Pot Leg could down me, but I was mistaken. Pardner, what's yer handle?"

"My name is Walter Hapgood, at your service," the sport replied.

"Not at my sarvice if I know it," the blusterer declared. "You've been thar already, an' I don't want no more. You're th' fust man that ever laid out Triangle Thomas, though, an' ye must put a big feather in yer hat an' wear it thar. D'ye hear me?"

"I do not count it much of an honor to have whipped you."

"Ye don't! Wal, dast yer pictur', sport," dropping his hand as he spoke, "you don't seem ter realize what a big thing ye have done. It is plain that ye never heerd o' Triangle Thomas afore, or ye'd know how ter 'presheate th' honcr ye've won. Why, over in Boot Heel whar I hail from I kin lick anything that wears breeches; I kin, fer a fact."

"Which does not speak very highly for that town as a whole," the sport commented.

Triangle Thomas felt his defeat keenly, but had the good sense not to invite further hostilities. He crossed the room to the bar, and there he turned and faced the crowd, saying:

"Galoots o' Pot Leg, I kem heur on biz ter-night, but afore I stated my biz I thought I'd have a leetle fun. I've had th' fun, an' now I'll come ter th' pint an' give ye th' facts."

Here was a surprise for everybody, and all wondered what could be coming.

"Yas," the man repeated, "I kem heur on biz, an' I'll tell ye what that biz is. I hail from th' town o' Boot Heel about ten miles down th' krick, an' I'm heur as a committee o' th' whole frim that burg."

Boot Heel was, as stated, a town about ten miles down the river from Pot Leg. It was a small town, but one of the worst in all that part of the country. It harbored ruffians and criminals of every degree. Whenever the better towns became too hot for a man, he would strike out for Boot Heel as a last resort, and so it came about that that town was known as a bad place.

"You cits o' Pot Leg has got th' idee inter yer noodles that this heur town is jest a trifle better than any other town in th' Yampah kentry. That ain't so, an' I'm heur ter say so. Th' leetle town o' Boot Heel is jest ez good ez Pot Leg, any day in th' week. You hear me?"

"That's all right, my friend," observed Lang, the manager of the saloon; "you are welcome to your opinion, I suppose."

"In course I am! but that ain't all I've got ter say."

"Well, out with th' rest then," some one exclaimed impatiently.

"Jest what I'm comin' to," said the great Triangle. "You folks o' this town no doubt thinks yerselves mighty far up, now that ye've got a party o' tenderfeet from th' East a-campin' next door to ye. We tried ter get 'em ter come ter Boot Heel, but they sort o' thought we wasn't good enough fer 'em, an' so they kem heur. Now we folks o' Boot Heel don't take over-kindly ter that, an' we've made up our minds that these heur tenderfeet ain't goin' ter see no easy times of it out heur, an' th' sooner they strikes back fer th' East, or comes over ter Boot Heel, th' better fer them an' this town. You've heerd me chirp."

Nebraska Nate rose up from where he was sitting, crossed over to where the man from Boot Heel was standing, laid his long and bony finger upon his breast, and said:

"Mister Triangle Thomas, did you ever heerd tell o' Nebraska Nate?"

"Reckon I have," the man answered.

"Wal, when you go back ter Boot Heel ye kin jest tell yer neighbors that Nebraska Nate is at th' head o' this party o' tenderfeet, an' that he is ready fer peace or war, jest ez ye want it."

CHAPTER IX.

A MYSTERIOUS PROWLER.

THE wild whirlwind looked at the old man as if in doubt as to what he meant.

"Mean jest what I say," said Nate, "an' ye want ter bear it in yer mind. We have come heur ter live in peace with all our neighbors, but ye may jest ez well onderstan' at th' beginnin' that we kin take keer o' ourselves, an' we mean ter do it, too."

"And I would like to remark that I am with the strangers, every time," observed Walter Hapgood, the sport who had just "done up" the terror. "I expect to stay at Pot Leg for a little while, and it will do me good to have a brush with you galoots of Boot Heel once in a while."

"An' ye kin sot it down that th' whole town o' Pot Leg is fer th' strangers," one good citizen declared.

"Rah fer Pot Leg!" some one else shouted, and instantly a loud, wild cheer was given.

"I never heerd o' a boot-heel an' a pot-leg a-fightin'," observed Big Gid, "but it looks ter me as if th' Boot Heel would git all it wants if it undertakes ter git away with th' Pot Leg in this case."

"You kin bet yer life it will!" was the general shout.

"And when you go back home," remarked Lang, the manager of the saloon, "you can tell yer fellow-Boot-Heelers that you got whipped like blazes, and that we can do the same for as many as want to come over and give us the chance."

"That's all right," the great cyclone muttered, "but that ain't sayin' ye kin do it ag'in. Besides, you didn't have nothin' ter do with it."

"I did, though, my pippin," said the sport, "and if you have any doubts about my ability to do it again, I am ready to dispel them for you at a moment's notice."

"That's all right," the man repeated, "but mebbey next time I'll be in better fightin' trim." This brought down the house, and amid the laughing, the hooting, and the yelling, the great Triangle slunk away.

When quiet was restored, Nebraska Nate turned to the crowd and inquired:

"Citizens, what d'ye think o' that galoot's threat?"

"Think he means what he says," answered one.

"Then ye have an idee that thar will be trouble, do ye?"

"We do, fer a fact."

"What is your opine, my friend?" turning to Sherman Mansfield.

"Well," the mine-owner answered, "there has always been a bone of contention between Pot Leg and Boot Heel, and I think there is likely to be trouble. I suppose your party are ready to fight, if necessary."

"You kin safely bet they are," the old guide replied. "Th' colonel is an old soldier, an' th' boys is full of it. But at th' same time, if we kin keep out o' trouble we want ter do it."

"That is only natural."

"An' now," Nate asked, "what be we ter expect from you men o' Pot Leg, in case o' a diffikilty?"

"We're with ye to th' teeth," was the unanimous response.

"Bully fer you!" cried Nate. "An' now let 'em come ter clean us out jest ez soon ez they wants ter. I reckon they'll find us right ter home when they calls."

"I do not look for an open attack," observed Mansfield. "It is the nature of the rascally denizens of Boot Heel to try to do some sort of mean thing in an underhand way. They are too cowardly to come right out and give battle. It is quite likely, however, that this is the last we will hear about it."

The thing was talked over at some length, and all seemed to think that while there was every prospect of a little trouble, there was no real cause for alarm.

Walter Hapgood, the sport who had whipped the terror from Boot Heel so neatly, engaged board and lodging at the Bobtail Flush, and announced it as his intention to remain there for some time.

He was on good terms with everybody already, and seemed to be a man of the right sort.

The hours passed, and midnight found the Bobtail Flush almost deserted. And a short time later the town was wrapped in slumber.

Another hour rolled by, and scarcely a sound was to be heard in all the valley.

Presently a man might have been seen coming from somewhere in the neighborhood of the Bobtail Flush.

He was clad in a sort of loose, black gown, and was masked.

It was dark, but dark as it was this man kept well into the shadows. And he moved along like a shadow-himself.

Only one of his hands could be seen, and in that one was a revolver.

Who was he? where was he going? and what could his errand be?

Had Big Gid, Nebraska Nate, or any one of the passengers of the special stage that had come to Pot Leg that evening, seen him, he would have been taken at once for Twilight Charlie.

Was it he?

It was a man of the same general appearance. Height and proportions were about the same, and the black gown looked very like the one the road-agent had worn.

Carefully and silently he proceeded, ready to defend himself at an instant's notice, and in this way he continued on until the last house of Pot Leg had been left behind.

Then the man increased his pace and hurried on to Empire Camp.

It was only a matter of a few hundred yards between the two places, after the outskirts of Pot Leg had been passed, and in a few minutes he was there.

Then again did he use extreme caution.

Going down to the water's edge, he turned there and approached the main building of the camp from the rear.

The buildings all being securely locked, except the tents, of course, no watch was kept during the night. It had not been thought necessary. But even had there been a watchman, the chances are that he would not have seen this silent prowler.

Forward the man crept, courting the blackest shadows, with his revolver still in his hand. And ere long he stood against the wall of the chief house of the camp.

There he paused and listened intently for some moments.

What did he intend to do? Was it his intention to kill? or was he a fire-fiend, whose purpose it was to set fire to the buildings?

He stood motionless for some time, and then he advanced cautiously along the side of the building to the front.

There he stopped again, but only for a brief moment, and then he went on to the front door.

When that point was reached he stopped once more, and this time in a way that indicated that he had gained a desired point.

Once more he listened, looking all around carefully as he did so, as though afraid of being seen.

He neither saw nor heard any one, however, and thus assured, he set about doing the business that had brought him thither.

Stepping down before the door, which, by the way was inclosed in a little porch, he took from under his cloak a small bag. This he opened, and out of it took a package of considerable size.

The package was neatly and carefully wrapped up, and, had there been sufficient light, on one corner might have been seen a written address.

Assuring himself that the package was in good order, the next thing the man did was to fasten it with a string to the knob of the door.

Had this taken place in a city, suspicion might have pointed to a dynamite plot; but away out

there in the wild-lands of Colorado, such a thing was hardly to be thought of.

The man did not fasten the package itself to the knob of the door, in the sense of the words, but left it standing on the step and tied the string to the knob. In this way, as soon as the door should be opened, the package would be pulled in and could not very well escape being seen.

When he had satisfied himself that everything was as he wanted it, he replaced the bag beneath his cloak and turned away.

And he retreated as silently and cautiously as he had come.

Following along the side of the building to the rear, he paused there a moment and then went down to the river and so on up toward town the way he had come.

In his hand he still carried a revolver, and while he did not seem to want to meet any one, the chances were that if he did it would be a case of "hands up!"

He continued on in silence, using all the caution he had shown in coming, and ere long was back in the town of Pot Leg. There he kept well in the friendly shadows, and proceeded to the point whence he had first appeared. He met no one, and presently disappeared into the deepest shadows and was seen no more.

Then the night rolled on, and nothing more was seen of the mysterious prowler.

When morning dawned, Colonel Featherstone was the first one astir at Empire Camp. He was always an early riser, and he was not any behind time now.

The sleeping apartments of the party, that is—of the Featherstone family and their friends, and Pansy Mayflower, were in the second story of the main building, while those of the servants and the guide were in the other buildings.

As soon as the colonel was up he started to go out. Unlocking the front door, he pulled it open, when to his surprise in came a package that was attached to the knob of the door by a string.

"Hello!" the colonel exclaimed, "what can this be?"

He picked the package up as he spoke, and looked at it.

It was a neat-looking package, carefully wrapped and tied, and on one corner of the top was this:

"COL. LINCOLN FEATHERSTONE,
Empire Camp."

"What in the world can this be?" the colonel thought, as he turned it over and over and looked at it on all sides.

"One way to find out, I suppose," he remarked, "and that is to open the thing and examine it."

Stepping back into the dining-room, he laid the package on the table, and then he cut the string that bound it and removed the paper.

Within the wrapper was a neat paper box, and in that was every article that had been taken from the party on the previous night by Twilight Charlie, the King of the Road.

CHAPTER X.

THE BLACK RIDER APPEARS.

COLONEL FEATHERSTONE was thunderstruck. Of all the surprises he had ever experienced, this one stood at the head.

Who would have thought of such a thing? Never had a road-agent been more thoroughly in earnest in his dealings, and now to have every article returned was a surprise complete.

"Well," the colonel ejaculated, "this beats anything I ever heard of! What was his object in robbing us?"

On the top of the articles in the box was a slip of paper that now met the colonel's eye.

"Ha!" the colonel exclaimed, "this may explain it."

Taking the slip of paper up, he opened it and read:

"COLONEL FEATHERSTONE:—

"DEAR SIR:—Herein you will find all that was taken from you and your party last night. Knowing that Sulphur Sam intended to stop you, I thought I would take a hand in the game and save your property for you. Very truly yours,
"TWILIGHT CHARLIE."

"Wonder of wonders!" the colonel exclaimed, as he stared at the note in blank amazement. "Why, the fellow ran the risk of his life! Who can he be?"

It was useless for the colonel to ask himself the question, for of course he could not answer it.

Who Twilight Charlie was, was a mystery. While the colonel was busy sorting out the things, Harold and Lucian came down.

"Great wonders!" exclaimed Harold, "what have you there, father?"

"Is it a pawnbroker's sale?" asked Lucian.

Both quickly recognized what it was, however, and their surprise was as great as that of the colonel had been.

"It was a daring piece of work," said Harold. "Why did he not warn us of the danger instead?"

"You are right it was!" responded Lucian. "but the question you ask is too deep for me. I give it up."

"He ran the risk of being shot," observed the colonel.

"Not from us," returned Harold with a laugh.

"Right you are," agreed Lucian.

Nebraska Nate came around while they were talking, and seeing the door open, he knocked and came in.

"Good-mornin', gentlemen," he saluted, "how are ye this mornin'?"

"We are all right, Nate," the colonel responded; "but see here."

"What be it?" Nate asked, as he went forward.

The three men pointed to the table.

"Great Thomas Q. Cat!" the old guide cried. "whar did these things come from?"

He was told.

"Wal, of all th' great things I ever heerd tell on," he commented, "this just tops th' pile. Who kin this Twilight Charlie be?"

"That is what we have been asking ourselves," said Harold, "but we have not been able to find an answer."

"Wal, it knocked Mister Sulphur Samuel out o' time, anyhow," said Nate. "It is somethin' I'd never 'a' dreamed of, though, that is sartin'."

"Can you tell us why he did not simply warn us, and then let us look out for ourselves?" inquired Harold.

"Wal," the old guide answered, "I reckon it war 'cause he had full confidence in his self, an' wanted ter play a leetle joke on Samuel. Besides, he knowed jest what a cuss Samuel is, an' he thought he'd save some bleed fer us."

"But," observed Lucian, "did he not run the risk of his life?"

"Wal, he jest did," the old man answered. "If I'd got half a chance at him I'd 'a' laid him out, an' don't ye fergit that. I don't say this ter boast, fer that ain't Nebraska Nate's style; but I say it 'cause it's th' fact. I did git one shot in at him, an' I can't see how it was I didn't fetch him. It ain't very often I have ter send two bullets on th' same errand. Glad I did miss, though, as it's turned out."

An hour later the whole camp was astir, and at the breakfast table the conversation naturally turned upon the daring road-agent and his generous conduct.

"I am sure he is not a genuine robber," remarked Frances, "for he was nothing like the other one who stopped us afterward."

"Indeed he was not!" exclaimed Miss Sheldon.

"And you have good reason to know," remarked the colonel, with a laugh.

Myra took it all in good part, and laughed with the rest.

"You know we remarked that he was well educated, evidently."

"He was certainly more gentlemanly in his conduct than the second one."

"And you remember, pa," observed Frances, "that he said you would think better of him when you came to know him."

"Yes, and I would like to know him, too."

And so the conversation ran.

During the forenoon Mr. Chauncey DeBrown called at the camp to pay his respects and to thank the party for what they had done for him on the previous night.

The colonel and the young men were out, and it fell to the ladies to entertain him.

"How do I find you after your great adventures of last night?" he asked, after first greetings had been exchanged.

"We are in excellent health and spirits," Miss Featherstone replied. "How are you this mornin'?"

"Never better," was the ready answer.

"I heard my brother saying that you had another adventure, too," Frances remarked.

"You refer to the trouble in the Bob—in the saloon, do you not?" the young man asked, hesitating over the name of the place.

"Yes," Frances answered with a smile.

They had heard the name of the saloon, and understood why the young man faltered over it.

"Ah! yes, it was quite an adventure, truly," DeBrown declared. "And it might have been quite serious for me, only for a young stranger who came to my rescue. I am no fighter, you understand, and the awful appearance of the man who was worrying me was quite enough to frighten 'most any one. But he got a great deal more than he had bargained for."

"And who was the person who came to help you?" asked Myra Sheldon.

"He called himself Walter Hapgood, and said he was from Denver."

"Yes, Mr. Redwood told us his name," said Frances, "but I had forgotten it."

Mrs. Featherstone joined in the chat heartily. Despite the great excitement she had lately undergone, she was feeling quite well, for her, and had high hopes of regaining her lost health.

And while they were talking, the colonel, Harold, and Lucian came in, and with them came none other than Walter Hapgood.

The young sport had done a slight favor for Harold and Lucian, and finding that he was a man of education, and not without social standing, they had introduced him to the colonel and invited him to the Camp.

He, Hapgood, was a chemist by profession, and was enjoying a season of rest in the mountains.

This was the first the cornet-player had seen of him since the previous night, and he hastened to thank him heartily for the service he had rendered.

"Do not mention it," said Hapgood. "It was not much, and I felt like having a little exercise anyhow."

"Oh! but I must mention it!" exclaimed DeBrown. "It would be very ungrateful of me not to do so. You have no idea, ladies, how beautifully he did whip that great, over-grown rascal. It did me good to see it."

"Pray spare me," Mr. Hapgood begged.

"No, I will not spare you," Chauncey declared, firmly. "If you ever need a protector, ladies, a fighting knight, call upon Mr. Hapgood."

"Let me know when you are done," said Hapgood, laughing.

"Well, I will say no more for the present," returned Chauncey, "but I shall not by any means give up sounding your praise."

"If I had known this," jokingly, "I believe I would have allowed that big villain to eat you up, cornet and all."

They were all seated in the sitting-room, which was in the front part of the main building, with two windows in front and two on the side, and from the latter the town of Pot Leg could be seen.

Conversation was going on nicely and all were in the best of good spirits, when suddenly something occurred to mar it all.

There was a sudden crash of glass, the girls sprang to their feet with loud screams, and some heavy object fell in upon the floor.

Almost at the same time there was a wild shout without, and then came a volley of pistol-shots. Then a horseman dashed out into sight, and started away up the valley toward Pot Leg at full speed.

Those who looked out recognized him at once. It was Sulphur Sam.

Whooping and yelling, he dashed away up the valley at breakneck speed, firing his revolvers as he ran, and in a few moments the whole town was out to intercept him.

But he did not falter. On he rode, right into their midst, and the rapid discharge of fire-arms on all hands sounded like a little war.

It seemed as though he was rushing on to certain death. It was a most daring venture, a foolhardy risk to run, but he seemed to bear a charmed life.

All at Empire Camp looked on with bated breath. They expected every instant to see the black rider reel and fall, but they were disappointed. On he rode; in a moment more he was in the midst of his enemies; in another moment he was beyond them; and then away he dashed into the canyon.

CHAPTER XI.

OFFER OF REWARD.

EVERY person at Empire Camp who had been watching, drew a long breath of relief, glad that the suspense was broken.

Whether they were glad the outlaw had escaped or not, we will not attempt to say. Certain it is, however, that our sympathies always go out to the fugitive rather than to the pursuers, whether right or wrong.

It was a daring ride, and an almost miraculous escape.

How he had escaped at all, was a mystery. But, it was clear that his time had not yet come.

"Heavens!" exclaimed the colonel, "but that was a narrow escape. It does not speak very well for the marksmanship of the citizens of Pot Leg."

"The chances were all in his favor," said Walter Hapgood.

"They were!" exclaimed Harold Featherstone; "how do you explain that?"

"Why, when the excitement is so great, no one stops to see where he is shooting. If he had been hit, it would have been more by accident than design. Still, with so many popping away at him, it is a wonder that some one did not put a bullet into him or his horse."

"I wonder if he killed any one," observed Frances Featherstone.

"I guess not," answered the sport. "He could have done so if he had desired, but I guess he did not want to."

"Now where is Twilight Charlie?" queried Lucian Alanson. "It is time he appeared and gave us a little exhibition of his bravery."

"You forget that he is not a road-agent of the same stamp," said the colonel.

"That is so."

"If he were to appear now," remarked the sport, "it would be sure death for him. The citizens up there at the town have got over their first excitement, and if Sulphur Sam were to return, he would be riddled with bullets in no time. So would Twilight Charlie, I have no doubt."

"The latter ought to wear a badge of distinction," observed Harold.

"You are right," agreed Hapgood.

"You have not examined what the man threw into the room," said Mrs. Featherstone, who had resumed her seat.

"Oh! true enough!" cried the girls, and they all sprung forward to where the object lay.

It proved to be a very large nail or spike, and tied around it was a piece of paper.

"It must be a message of some sort," observed Myra Shelden.

Frances removed the string that held the paper in place, and then removed the paper and spread it out.

She was the first to read it, and the moment she did so she laughed heartily.

"What is it?" demanded Myra.

"It must be very amusing," remarked Harold.

"It is for Myra," said Frances. "If she wants you to know what it is, she will no doubt show it to you."

"For me!" exclaimed Myra; "you are joking."

"Indeed I am not; it is certainly for you," Francis insisted.

"And what is it?" Myra asked, her face as red as it well could be.

"Perhaps a token of love," suggested Harold.

Frances smiled and handed the letter over to her friend.

Myra read it, her face losing none of its color as she did so, and then she threw it upon the floor.

"The wretch!" she cried indignantly.

"Will you allow me to read it?" asked Harold, as he stooped and picked it up.

"Yes, read it out," Myra answered.

Harold held the paper up to the light and read:

"TO THE BLONDE BEAUTY OF EMPIRE CAMP:—

"Know that Sulphur Sam loves you. He would almost lay down his life for you. See what he risks to deliver this to you. He is ready to give up his wild life, if he can win your love in return. He desires an interview, and will advise later the time and place. Will you grant it? No danger. You shall hear from him again."

"SULPHUR SAM."

"This is an outrage!" thundered the colonel.

"It certainly is," agreed Harold.

"Of course you will grant what he asks," said Frances, laughing, turning to her friend.

"Of course I will not, then!" Myra snapped.

"What is to be done about this thing?" demanded the colonel, turning to Walter Hapgood.

"Pay no attention to it," the young sport advised.

"But, we have got to do something," the colonel objected. "We cannot allow that road-agent to have things his own way."

"That is so, too; but in regard to this letter, I mean, it is best to take no notice whatever of it."

"I certainly shall not," declared Myra, firmly.

While this was being discussed, Big Gid drove down from town to say good-bye to the party. He was about to return home.

When he started, the men of the camp, with Hapgood and DeBrown, rode up with him as far as the Bobtail Flush Saloon.

There the driver bade them a final adieu, and then with a cheery "gee-up!" and a crack of his long whip, started, and was soon lost to sight in the canyon.

As soon as the stage was out of sight, the colonel led the way into the saloon.

There the whole subject of conversation was the two road-agents, and their peculiar doings.

Everybody had heard how Twilight Charlie had returned to Colonel Featherstone all the property he had taken from his party, and he was voted a good fellow.

If it was his intention to do as well by everybody whom he robbed, he would be a good man to have on the road. But that was uncertain. No one could tell what his next exploit would be, and it seemed extremely improbable that he would ever prove as generous again. If he was a genuine road-agent, and his way of doing business went to prove that he was, such a red-letter mark in his career was never likely to happen again.

Then, too, if it was really his intention to oppose Sulphur Sam, there was likely to be some trouble, and one or the other of the two would have to give up and surrender the field.

Which would it be?

"One thing is certain," remarked Nebraska Nate, "an' that 'ar is, that thar has got ter be somethin' done ter insure th' safety o' th' people o' Empire Camp."

"They shall have every protection we are able to give them," declared Sherman Mansfield.

"That 'ar is all right," said Nate; "but this Sulphur Samuel is likely ter give us a pile o' trouble if we ain't mighty watchful o' him, an' it strikes me that th' sooner his career is wound up, th' better it will be fer th' place."

"No doubt of that," Walter Hapgood affirmed, "but who is going to cut short his career?"

"And how is it to be done?" asked Howard Lang.

"I have an idea that I mean to test," said the colonel, "and that is to offer a reward. I shall offer a reward of a thousand dollars for his cap-

ture, and that at once. It will give the bold rangers of the hills something to work for."

"Several rewards are already posted," remarked Mansfield.

"Then mine will add to the sum total," rejoined the colonel.

Stepping to the bar, the colonel asked for a sheet of paper and a pen, and having been supplied, he proceeded at once to write out the reward he intended to post.

While he was busy at that, the others carried on the subject of conversation, and everybody had some plan to offer.

Presently the colonel was done, and then he handed the sheet of paper to Harold, and requested him to put it up on the wall.

Harold did so, and then all present read the following:

"\$1000 REWARD.

"The above reward will be paid for the arrest of the outlaw, Sulphur Sam, with proof of identity."

"LINCOLN FEATHERSTONE."

"That's all right," observed Nebraska Nate, "but that don't bring him heur, not by a high kick."

"It may be the means of bringing him here, however," the colonel argued, "and the thousand dollars is ready for the man who will do it."

"Well, some one may undertake it," said Walter Hapgood, "but it is hard to guess who it will be."

"And it is harder to guess what the result will be," added Harold Featherstone.

While the matter was being thus discussed, the postmaster of the town came into the saloon with a letter in his hand.

"Here is a letter that has been dropped into the office some time this morning," he announced. "It is addressed to the manager of the Bobtail Flush, and is marked as important."

"And you thought you would bring it over, eh?" said Lang.

"Yes."

"Well, let's see what it is."

Lang took the letter and removed its contents, and then read it aloud.

There was one brief note inclosed, and that he read first. It ran as follows:

"DEAR SIR:—Will you please post the inclosed in some conspicuous place in your saloon?"

"TWILIGHT CHARLIE."

"An' what is ther inclosed?" was the general demand.

"Wait one moment," said Lang, "and I will post it up where all can read it."

CHAPTER XII.

PREPARING FOR TROUBLE.

ALL present were impatient to see what the communication could be, and all crowded around the manager of the saloon while he proceeded to dispose of the inclosed paper as requested.

When it was posted on the wall the crowd surged forward to see it.

"What be it, pards?" called out those who could not get near enough to see for themselves at first.

"Shall I read it out aloud?" asked Walter Hapgood.

"Yer bet yer shall, pardner, if yer will," was the immediate response.

"Very well, then, I will do so," said the sport, and he stepped upon a chair to comply.

Many of those who stood near, however, had already begun to read it.

It ran as follows:

"To the People of Pot Leg, greeting:—

"Twilight Charlie, Sulphur Sam's counterpoise, self-styled, wants it understood that he is in no way connected with that rascal, but is against him every time. The robbery of the special stage last night is a sample of the work he intends to do, and he intends to carry it on until he drives the Samuel afore-said from the trail. And he will mean business when he says 'Hands up,' too. Thinking that perhaps it will be well for him to have a badge of distinction, he will from this time forth wear a silver star upon his breast."

"TWILIGHT CHARLIE."

"'Rah fer Charlie!" exclaimed some one, when Walter Hapgood was done reading.

"We'll call him th' King o' the Road."

"That's a good title," observed Hapgood, "but hadn't you better wait until you see whether he intends to live up to his promise?"

"I haven't the least doubt about that," said Colonel Featherstone. "He has already given us a fair sample of his style of doing work."

"What is your opinion about it, Nebraska Nate?" asked Harold.

"Jest th' same as yer daddy's," the old guide answered.

"Well," said Hapgood, "we must wait and see."

"That's true enough," said the colonel, "and it is about all we can do, too."

"Right you are."

It was patent to everybody that there was a big chance for some fun ahead in the near future.

What that fun would be no one could rightly guess.

The coming of the party from the East, the appearance of the two road-agents almost at the same time, the threats of the man from Boot Heel, all together were indicative of a little trouble.

When Colonel Featherstone and his companions returned to Empire Camp, they had something to think about.

What if there were to be a battle between the two towns, and Pot Leg were whipped, what would become of the women of their party?

It was a serious question, and one that caused the colonel not a little uneasiness of mind.

Nor was the colonel the only one who experienced that uneasiness of mind.

Harold Featherstone had not forgotten the note that had been delivered to Myra Shelden by Sulphur Sam, and he trembled for her safety.

What more natural than that the outlaw should be on friendly terms with the denizens of Boot Heel, and that he should employ them to aid him in carrying off the object of his so-called love?

It was certainly enough to give any of them cause for uneasiness.

It may be easily guessed that there was an undercurrent of love among the young people of Empire Camp.

Such was the case.

Harold and Myra were, it may be said, lovers, and that was certainly the case with Lucian Alanson and Frances Featherstone.

As for Pansy Mayflower, if she had no lover it was no fault of hers. She was certainly pretty enough to have one. But if not a lover, she certainly had admirers, and among them were Chauncey DeBrown and Walter Hapgood.

There were others, too, at Pot Leg who had had an eye upon her—an eye for the beautiful, as it were.

When the men of the party got back to the Camp, the colonel asked them all to step for a moment into his private room.

They complied, and the colonel said:

"It is my opinion, boys, that we are going to have some trouble."

"I am half-afraid of it," agreed Harold.

"What sort of trouble do you refer to?" inquired Lucian.

"Why, trouble with the hard crowd over at the town of Boot Heel," the colonel responded.

"Do you know," observed Lucian, "that I have been thinking a great deal about that? What if those fellows of Boot Heel should come over here and give battle to us? We would have our hands full, I'm afraid."

"And what if they should whip us and carry off the women?" said the colonel, putting the truth they all felt into plain words.

It was, indeed, a horrible thought.

"Which little same thing they kain't do," drawled Nebraska Nate.

This caused a general smile, and rather brightened the prospects.

"No, sir," repeated Nate, "they kain't do it. In th' fu'st place, we are pooty well-fixed fer weepins ourselves, an' have a pooty good sort o' fort heur ter stand a siege; an' we ain't at all bad off fer men. Then add ter that, there's th' whole town o' Pot Leg ter back us."

"That is all so," owned Harold, "and it does not seem as bad as it did at first glance."

"I looked at all that," said the colonel, "but I do not feel by any means safe. I know we are pretty strong, and have good backing, but at the same time it cannot be denied that we are not at all used to the ways of the country out here, and are likely to have our hands pretty full."

"Now look right heur," said Nebraska Nate, as he laid his hand on the colonel's arm; "we don't want no sich ideas as them is, colonel. Heur we be, an' th' wimmen is ter be pertected at any cost. Now, th' only idee we want is ter fix onter th' idee that we kain't be whipped. An', by hokey, we kain't, nuther! Nebraska Nate hain't lived all these years out heur without knowin' somethin' o' th' ways o' th' kentry, an' I rathur think he kin hold his own with any set o' howlin' Tommy Triangles that th' town o' Boot Heel kin scare up. Them's my ideas. When you kem ter me, colonel, an' axed me if I'd join yer party, it are nat'ral ter s'pose that ye had some idee that I'd be o' some sort o' good ter ye. Now, if thar's ter be any sort o' difficulty with th' burg o' Boot Heel, you kin bet yer pile that Nebraska Nate is goin' ter be right on top o' th' heap. If ther town o' Pot Leg kain't whip ther howlin' Triangles o' Boot Heel, then th' town o' Pot Leg had better shut shop right up. Them's my opines, straight!"

"Nate," said the colonel, "give me your hand."

"Thar it is, colonel," said the old guide, as he extended his rough and honest hand, "an' thar's narves an' sinners in that hand that run right ter my heart."

The two shook hands warmly, and the colonel said:

"I believe you, my good man, and if I have said anything to hurt your feelings, I am sorry for it."

"No harm done, colonel, not th' least in th' world. But, it strikes me that you had some-

thin' more ter say when ye called us in heur; so if he have, let it right out."

"You have guessed aright," the colonel answered; "I have something to say, and I think you will agree with me on the point."

"No doubt about that, fer I reckon ye have hoss sense in yer head," the old guide remarked, bluntly.

"That remains to be seen," said the colonel. "I will tell you, however, what my idea is, and then you can judge of its merit."

"Go ahead."

"Well, my idea is just this: There is some sign of danger, and to be forewarned is to be forearmed. We have plenty of arms with us, and I believe it will be a good plan to bring them all into this main building of our camp and make a fort of it in a small way. You know the windows are strong and well-protected, and it will be but little work to make our position perfectly secure."

"Thar's nothin' wrong with that plan, colonel, an' we'll do it. Not that I have much o' an idea that thar'll be a reg'lar war, but we kain't most allus tell."

"Will it not greatly alarm the ladies?" questioned Harold.

"That is something we cannot help," answered the colonel. "We need not let them know what the danger is, though, and they will feel more secure. And, Nate, we will have you sleep here in the building with us, downstairs."

"Jest ez you say, colonel," was the old guide's response; "I'm willin' ter do anything that don't go ag'in' my conscience an' hoss sense."

So it was arranged, and the work was commenced at once.

Colonel Featherstone, while he had not thought there was likely to be any real danger, had taken the precaution to bring along a good supply of weapons, and now they were likely to prove valuable if the men of Boot Heel meant to give them any trouble.

The arms were all brought into the main building, the windows were all carefully looked after, and a place was arranged where Nebraska Nate could sleep.

These arrangements did alarm the women of the party, but when they were reminded that they were in a wild land, and that it was better to be prepared than to meet an enemy otherwise, they were satisfied.

And it may seem strange, but the greater the excitement the better Mrs. Featherstone seemed to feel.

The change in her was remarkable.

All the afternoon was taken up in making the necessary changes around the Camp, and when it was all done there was a general feeling of satisfaction all around.

"Thar," said Nebraska Nate, "th' hull thing is ready, an' I'd like ter see th' galoots o' Boot Heel roust us out o' heur if they kin. It ruther strikes me that if they know when they're well off they'll steer clear o' Pot Leg."

"Of Empire Camp, you mean," corrected Miss Featherstone, who overheard.

"Right you are, miss," said Nate; "beg yer pardon."

CHAPTER XIII.

RUMORS OF WAR.

WHEN night had settled down over the town of Pot Leg and its near neighbor, Empire Camp, everybody felt that it had been a day of excitement for that quiet place.

Not that it had been a very exciting day, but there had been enough of that element to show that there was something of an unusual nature in the wind.

The past twenty-four hours had witnessed quite a number of stirring incidents, and there was a general feeling that there was still more to follow.

There was a certain feeling of oppressiveness in each mind that no one could well explain.

What did it mean?

When supper was over at the Camp, Colonel Featherstone, Harold, Lucian Alanson, and Nebraska Nate, all strolled up to Pot Leg to see what was going on.

By their absence they did not by any means leave the Camp unprotected, for there were several men-servants in the party, and they were under orders not to leave the Camp at any time without permission.

Not that they would have been of any great account in a fight, but they were by no means cowards, and understood well the position they were in.

In case of necessity they were to sound an alarm at once.

To the genuine Westerner, such extreme caution seemed altogether unnecessary, but it must be remembered that these people were fresh from the East, and had not served in any very great excitements thus far.

When the colonel and his friends entered the Bobtail Flush, they found quite a goodly crowd there, and everything was running on about as usual in a place of the kind.

"Good-evening, Colonel Featherstone," said Sherman Mansfield; "how are you to-night?"

"First-rate, Mr. Mansfield," was the colonel's reply; "how is it with you?"

"I can give about the same report," Mansfield returned.

"Anything further from Sulphur Samuel?" inquired Howard Lang.

"Not a thing," was the answer; "and we hope there will not be."

"It is hardly worth while to wish that," observed Lang, "for from all accounts he is a man who does not stop when he gets his mind set on anything."

"All I have got ter say ter him," said Nebraska Nate, "is that he had better think twice afore he comes foolin' round heur any more."

"He fears nothing," remarked Mansfield.

"I know he don't," said Nate, "and that is jest what is goin' ter get him inter trouble sooner er later. He is too mighty reckless ter carry things on ferever th' way he is doin' now."

"And perhaps that other gentleman of the road—Twilight Charlie—will be taking a hand in the games before long," remarked Harold.

"Say," the manager of the saloon quickly supplemented, "I'll bet there will be a time between them two fellers before a very long while rolls by, now mind what I tell you."

"Haven't th' least doubt about that," averred Nebraska Nate.

While this conversation was going on, Chauncey DeBrown came in with his cornet.

"Hullo!" exclaimed Nebraska Nate, "heur comes Mister GoBrown; an' now fer a leetle moosic."

"DeBrown, if you please, my good friend," the young man corrected.

"Yes, that's so," said Nate; "an' I beg yer pardon. I knowed that thar was some sort o' a front part to it, but I couldn't exactly remember what it was. I'll try an' be more keerful in th' future an' bear it in mind."

"That is all right," said the young man, "and no harm done."

"Wal, come an' give us a leetle tune," Nate invited.

"If I may be permitted to do so," responded Chauncey, as he looked to the manager of the place for the answer.

Lang knew well what was good for his saloon, and of course he readily gave the desired permission.

Chauncey took his place in the end of the room and began to play.

To the people of Pot Leg this was a treat, and Chauncey was correspondingly happy. As compared with the boarding-houses of Boston, where he had been looked upon as a social evil hardly to be tolerated, this was a haven of delight.

While he was playing away at his best, and while everybody else was enjoying it and talking in groups of two and three or half a dozen, there came a sudden exclamation of surprise from some one near the door, and all eyes were instantly turned in that direction.

And then the exclamation of surprise was general.

It was a startling sight that met their view.

Simultaneously with the first exclamation, almost, there came a heavy tread on the floor, and when all turned around they beheld a man riding into the room on horseback.

This man was clad in a loose black gown, had a mask over his face, and on his breast shone a star of silver.

"Twilight Charlie!" was the general cry.

"At your service," the masked rider responded with a bow.

And then he rode on into the room.

"How is your floor here?" he asked, addressing the proprietor.

"Solid enough for you, I guess," was the reply.

"All right; I thought I would ask to be sure. It would be no joke for my horse to fall through."

It was noticed that the man carried a drawn revolver in one hand, while with the other he managed his horse.

"Does anybody feel inclined to drink at my expense?" he asked, as he turned toward the bar.

"Wal, we reckons we do!" was the response from nearly all the citizens present, and they all presented themselves at the bar with promptness and dispatch.

"Mention yer poison, gentlemen," said Lang, and he stood ready to hand out his wares.

The crowd called for what they wanted in the way of liquid refreshment, and all drank to the health of Twilight Charlie, the King of the Road—as they insisted upon calling him.

"By th' way, Mister Charlie," asked Nebraska Nate, "what have ye got yer pop all ready fer business fer?"

"That is the proper way for a man of my stamp to carry his tools," the masked man replied.

"True ernuff, ter a sartain extent," returned Nate, "but you have declared yer good intentions to'rds th' people o' this heur burg."

"That is true also," Twilight Charlie rejoined, "but the town of Pot Leg has not declared its good intentions toward me."

"Which is sartainly not because they don't mean to, I opine," observed Nate.

"Perhaps not; but how could I know that?"

"Know it now, then," said one good citizen, "fer I think I am safe in sayin' that it are th'

sentiment o' this town that our 'entions is good."

"That's th' ticket, every time," was the general cry.

"Well," said the masked rider, "if that is the case, I will put away my weapon. I warn you, however, not to attempt to learn who I am by any tricks."

"We gives ye our word on that, King Charlie," some one shouted.

"That we does!" echoed all.

Twilight Charlie was masked completely. This it is necessary to hold well in mind in order to appreciate all that is to follow. And by that is meant that he was so completely masked that it was utterly impossible to guess who he was. Not a feature was visible, and the black gown defied all attempts at supposing.

"I see you received the notice I sent you this morning," the masked rider said as he rode down the room on his horse and stopped before the poster on the wall.

"Yes," answered Lang, "and you see I have put it up as you requested me to do."

"Very much obliged to you, too," said the horseman. "On that poster, my friends, you see what I intend to do in this region. And—Hello! what is this?" and he stopped short as his eyes fell upon the notice of reward offered by Colonel Featherstone.

"That are a leetle reward offered fer Sulphur Samuel," answered Nebraska Nate.

"A reward for Sulphur Sam, eh? Well, I wonder if I can't rake that in. A thousand dollars can't be picked up every day. I guess I'll have to try for it, anyhow."

"If you can earn it you shall have it," declared Colonel Featherstone.

"Haven't the least doubt about that, my dear sir," said the masked man, laughing.

"When do ye purpose ter begin?" asked Nebraska Nate.

The rider laughed.

"I shall begin at once," he replied. "The sooner the better, you know."

"Yas, that's so, I have no doubt. When d'ye mean ter have th' feller heur fer hangin', though?" the old guide asked.

"That depends on how soon I can get hold of him, my friend. And it may prove a game of crosscuts. He may get hold of me before I get hold of him. But I will try and hold my own against him. And now let me tell you that I came here more on business than on pleasure, and that there is music in the air around these diggings."

"What do you mean?" asked Harold Featherstone.

"What I mean is this," was the reply: "The whole town of Boot Heel is coming over here to-night, and they mean to clean you out in the very worst kind of way. They are on the road now, and will be here within an hour."

This was something a little more than startling to the men of Empire Camp.

Here were their worst fears almost realized.

There was likely to be a "time" in the full sense of the word.

"Do you know this to be so?" asked Colonel Featherstone.

"I do, sir," was the firm assurance. "The whole town, about two hundred strong, is now on the road, and will be here within an hour, as I said. Most of them are fighting drunk, and you will have to handle them without gloves."

"Have you any idea what their intention is, in detail?" asked Sherman Mansfield.

"Well, no, not in detail, as you put it, but it is my opinion that they intend to try to drive the people of Empire Camp out of this valley if they can, since they would not take up their quarters near Boot Heel; and they may undertake to burn the town. You must give them such a warm reception right at the start that they will feel sick of their undertaking. That is about the only way to deal with such characters."

"Right ye are," agreed Nebraska Nate. "An' now, friends," he added, "let's git ready ter give 'em pertickler fits!"

CHAPTER XIV.

ARMED FOR THE STRIFE.

IN a very short time the whole town of Pot Leg was in an uproar of excitement, for the news which Twilight Charlie had brought flew fast.

No one for a moment doubted the truth of his statement, and every man made haste to see that his weapons were in good fighting order.

There was "blood on the moon" now, as they expressed it, and they meant to see what sort of metal the men of Boot Heel were made of.

Colonel Featherstone inquired of Twilight Charlie whether he was going to stay at Pot Leg or not, and the wearer of the silver star replied that he could not do so. He had other business to attend to, so he said, and must move on.

And he soon did so. Riding out of the saloon, he turned to the north and was soon lost to sight in the canyon.

He was gone, and the mystery that surrounded him was as deep as ever.

Colonel Featherstone and his party hastened at once to the Camp, and there they hurriedly began to put the place in order of defense.

The afternoon having been spent at that work, there was not much left to be done. Half an hour saw the main building of the Camp in perfect order.

Now, the women of the party were thoroughly alarmed. They saw that there was a danger that was really at hand, and they demanded to know what it was.

And it was thought best to tell them.

This was done, but the danger was robbed of a good deal of its reality in the telling. They were told that a party of drunken roughts were on their way over from the town of Boot Heel, and that there might be a little trouble with them; but they were not allowed to learn that they were coming on purpose to break up the Camp and turn them out of the valley.

When everything had been arranged, the colonel went back to Pot Leg.

He had left Harold in charge of the Camp, to act under the directions of Nebraska Nate in everything.

Going into the saloon again, he called the attention of the crowd there and said:

"My friends, how many of you have ever served as soldiers?"

"Me!"

"I!"

"Me too!"

"Same here!"

Such were the immediate replies from some twenty of those present.

"Good!" the colonel exclaimed. "I, too, have been a soldier," he said, "and now if you will join me and act under my command, I am sure we can put these rascals from Boot Heel to flight in no time."

"Rah fer ther colonel!" was the immediate shout, and those who claimed to have been soldiers hastened to crowd around him.

"Now it is not my intention to ask you to join me without pay," said the colonel, "for I expect to pay you well; and if any one of you happens to get hurt in the scrimmage, I will take care of him."

"That's all right, colonel," answered one, "but we was just goin' down to the Camp ter offer our services to ye, th' hull gang of us."

"Glad to hear that," the colonel responded, "but it will be a great deal better, you know, to go for them in the good old way."

"Yas, that's so," was the shout.

"And a little company of drilled men, you know, can put a mob to flight in short order, in most cases."

"Rah fer Pot Leg!" was the cry.

"I have plenty of arms down at the Camp," said the colonel, "and we will go right down there and get them."

"Good enough! Come right along, pardners, an' we'll see if we can't make things warm fer th' Boot Heelers when they git heur."

They all started for the Camp, and lost no time in getting there.

When they arrived the colonel armed them, and then put them through a hasty drill to see what they knew.

With hasty care he put them through all the maneuvers that he thought would be necessary for the occasion, and he was pleased to find that they knew their business.

Nebraska Nate looked on with calm indifference.

This was not his idea of warfare, but it was the colonel's own business, and if it suited the colonel, why of course he had no reason to growl.

"I don't go much on millerterry tick-tacks," he remarked, "but I s'pose they're all right in their place if a man knows how ter handle 'em."

"They certainly are," the colonel assured him. "If we have half a chance, I fancy we shall make the enemy feel tired in a short time."

While these arrangements were going on, there came a knock at the door, and on opening it Walter Hapgood stepped into the room.

"Ha! what is this I hear?" he exclaimed. "Going to have a fight?"

"That is the way it looks just now," answered the colonel.

"Bet yer life it do!" cried Nebraska Nate. "Thar's likely ter be one o' th' wu'st leetle skirmishes ther town o' Pot Leg ever see'd. That is ter say it will be if it comes off accordin' ter programme."

"And it is likely to, from all accounts," added Harold.

"It seems that Boot Heel is coming over here to clean you out, if I have got the story right," Hapgood half questioned.

"That is ther idee, pard," said Nate.

"And you mean to give them a warm reception, eh?"

"Wal, we jest do then, an' don't fergit it."

"Well, Colonel Featherstone," said the sport, "here I am, and if I can be of any service to you I want to serve."

"Thank you heartily," returned the colonel; "we shall be glad to count you as one of us."

"Where are the ladies?" asked the sport.

"They are all up-stairs, and the women servants with them," was answered.

"That is good. They must stay away from

the windows, you know, and I guess they will be perfectly safe."

"They have been told to do so," said the colonel, "and no doubt they will be glad enough to do it."

"Well, what—"

There came a loud and nervous knock at the door, interrupting him.

"Who is there?" demanded the colonel.

"Good friends, it is I," responded a voice that was unmistakably that of Chauncey DeBrown.

The colonel opened the door at once.

In slipped the Bostonian, with his cornet under his arm.

"Thank you, good friends, thank you," he cried. "I thought I would come over and join you, and if there is anything I can do, you have but to command me."

Most of those present were uncharitable enough to believe that the young man had come to the Camp more to insure his personal safety.

Perhaps it was his nervousness of manner that led them to that thought.

"You are welcome, sir," he was told, "and if there is anything you can do, we will call upon you."

"Do so, by all means," said the young man.

"And now," he added, "will you please tell me where to put my cornet, so that it will be perfectly safe?"

In spite of the grave situation, this created a laugh.

Pansy Mayflower entered just then, with some word for the colonel, and she offered to take the young man's cornet up-stairs.

"Thank you very much," said Chauncey.

"Please do so, and I shall never forget the favor."

"It is but a small favor, sir," returned Pansy, and with a smile she took the horn and ran back up stairs again.

"A deuced pretty girl," muttered DeBrown, as he gazed after her.

"Right you are," agreed Walter Hapgood, who overheard him.

"And as good as she's pretty, too," observed the colonel.

"No discounting that," coincided Harold and Lucian.

"A choice bud for some young man to pluck," the colonel laughed.

The colonel had no idea that the two men had notions quite in keeping with his own, nor that they both had their eyes set upon the girl with flames of love kindling in their hearts.

"Well, Colonel Featherstone," said Mr. DeBrown, "if you will give me a gun I will stand guard here at one of these windows. I am not an expert warrior, but I think I can defend one of these portals successfully."

The windows, by the way, were all bolted and barred.

"Very well," said the colonel, "there is a gun. You must take care, however, not to kill a friend instead of a foe."

"An' be sure ye cock yer gun afore ye shoot," added Nebraska Nate.

"I will observe your cautions, my friends."

Just then there arose a loud shouting without.

"Can it be that they are here already?" questioned the colonel. "I wanted to get out of doors with my men before they arrived, in order to meet them on fair ground."

"Just what I was going to suggest," said Hapgood. "If we could meet them when they first come into the valley, it would give us a big advantage. No, I guess this is not they. It must be the citizens of Pot Leg, or a good portion of them at least, coming to give us their help."

"Well, let us go out and see what is going on," said the colonel. "Harold," he added, "you stay here, you and Lucian, and guard the house. Nate will stay—"

"No, Nate won't," interrupted he, quickly; "Nate is goin' ter be whar th' fightin' is goin' on."

This for a moment made a great confusion, for no sooner were the words out of the old guide's mouth than all the others raised the same objection. No one wanted to be considered as playing a coward's part. Mr. DeBrown, however, finally agreed to stay there as an especial favor, and the male servants of the party were not at all averse to doing the same, and when the little ripple of merriment that this created had subsided, the colonel settled the whole matter by assuming his authority as the head of the party and giving orders as to who should stay and who should not.

CHAPTER XV.

THE BOOT-HEEL CROWD ARRIVES.

THAT little trouble all settled, the colonel and his men went outside at once, and there found that a great crowd of men from Pot Leg had come down to join him and take a hand in the fight.

"Heur we be," they cried, "an' if we can't make th' men o' Boot-Heel weep, we'll do th' weepin' ourselves."

"Glad to have your help," said the colonel, "but I hope there will be no great trouble. I have a good force, all old soldiers, and I think

we can make a good showing when we get to work."

"Well, where will you take your stand?" asked Hapgood.

"What is your idea about that?" the colonel inquired.

"Well, since you ask, sir," the young man answered, "I will tell you what I think about it."

"Do so."

"These men are likely to come up along the river, I think, and the place for us to meet them is at the end of the valley where they will have but little room. There we may be able to take the fight out of them without doing any great damage to any of them. I suppose you do not want to kill unless forced to do so."

"You are right," the colonel responded, "I have no desire to harm one of them if it can be avoided. We must protect ourselves and those who are dear to us, though, at any cost."

"Right ye are," agreed Nebraska Nate, "an if they won't take good advice we'll have ter give 'em powder an' ball."

"Are you well acquainted with the lay of the land here?" asked the colonel, turning to the sport.

"Yes, pretty well," was the reply.

"Then suppose you lead us to the best place you know of."

"If you wish, colonel."

"I do."

"Come on, then."

The colonel formed his little company and gave the order—"Forward, march!" and followed the way the sport led, while the crowd brought up the rear.

The sport conducted them to the southern end of the little valley, and there they soon found a suitable spot to take their stand.

And they were none too soon, for barely had they placed themselves than they heard the crowd from Boot Heel coming.

"Heur they come!" exclaimed Nebraska Nate, "an' now for th' ball ter open."

At the southern end of the valley the base of a big mountain started up abruptly from the side of the river, and it was here where the trail was very narrow that the men of Pot Leg made their stand.

Here they could defend the valley against a host.

On the one hand was the river, and on the other the rocky wall of the mountain. And the space between was not more than a dozen feet wide at the opening.

It was just the place for one armed force to lie in waiting for another.

The voices of the crowd from Boot Heel could be heard, and not far away, and the men of Pot Leg braced themselves for the struggle.

"I reckon thar will be music in ther air," observed Nebraska Nate, as he listened, "for th' sound o' ther voices sort o' iderfies that thar's plenty o' jig-water aboard; an' whar thar is rum in th' belly there is a lack o' wit in th' head, every time."

"You never uttered truer words," said the colonel. "The man that has a fondness for rum is not such a man as his Maker intended he should be. When the rum is in the wit is out."

"Whar thar's any to go out," added Nate.

Nearer and nearer came the Boot Heel crowd, and soon they were close at hand.

And then some of their talk could be understood.

It seemed that they wanted to approach in silence, but they were not half sober enough to do so. At least that was the case with a great many of them.

Some were trying to urge the others to keep silent, but they might as well have tried to stop the wind from blowing.

"We'll give 'em t'icklar fits," said one, with a drunken whoop.

"We'll burn 'em out," exclaimed another.

"No Eastern airs out heur," was the remark of still another, and so it went.

The men of Pot Leg set their teeth hard as they listened.

"We'll show ye," hissed one. "Th' town o' Pot Leg has had a good name thus far, an' we don't p'pose ter 'low no sickly gang from th' burg o' Boot Heel to do us up, not by several times several we don't."

"Ye'll find that we're right ter home, an' th' pot a-bilin'," growled another.

"Silence now," ordered the colonel; "they are right at hand."

All became silent, and the enemy came on.

Just before they emerged into the valley, however, their leader called a halt.

"Halt, ye galoots!" he ordered. "Now heur we be at th' town o' Pot Leg, an' ef we want ter s'prise 'em we have got ter keep our heads shut. I've been a-tellin' ye all along ter keep still, but ye wouldn't do it, an' now I tell ye ag'in."

"Sall right," was the response; "we'll be still. Let ther peresh go on."

"Very well, see that ye do keep still; and now not another word till I tell ye ter give the war-whoop."

"All right; so let's get on. We're jest a-dyin' ter chaw this town up."

"Well, then, forward."

On they came, and in a moment more they came into sight.

Then, to their surprise, they were suddenly ordered to halt.

"Halt, you rascals!" cried Colonel Featherstone, sternly. "If you advance another foot we will cut you to pieces."

Needless to say the men of Boot Heel did stop.

There before them stood a score of men, drawn up in line, and each of them with a rifle at his shoulder.

It was night, but there was quite light enough to enable the rascals from Boot Heel to see what kind of a reception they were about to get.

"What brings you here?" the colonel demanded.

"W—what's th' matter?" queried the leader of the gang; "what ha' we done that ye meet us in this heur style?"

"It is not what you have done," the colonel answered, "but what you intended to do."

"An' what did we intend ter do?"

"Ask yourselves that question."

"We're axin' you."

"Well, were you not threatening to burn the town?"

"Naw, we wasn't; what d'ye think we'd want ter burn th' town fer?"

"No use lying about it," said the colonel, "for we heard you laying your plans as you came along. Now the best thing you can do is to turn face about and get back to your own town as soon as you can."

"How did ye know we war comin'?" one of the party asked.

"No matter how we l'arned it," answered Nebraska Nate, "we did l'arn it, an' that's all it's necessary ter tell ye."

"You see we are all armed and ready for you," said the colonel, "and if you are not fools you will not press us."

"An' d'ye mean ter say thet ye won't let us come on ter Pot Leg?" the crowd demanded.

"Nary a come!" the men of Pot Leg returned.

"Wal, we reckons we'll see about that, eh, feller-citizens?" the leader of the Boot Heel crowd snorted.

"Ye kin jest bet we will!" was the cry.

"You had better not try it on," was the general warning.

"Wa-a-a-gh!" cried the familiar voice of Triangle Thomas, as he forced his way along toward the front, "we'll show ye whether we won't go on ter yer town or not! Ye kin jest bet high that we are goin', an' that's all thar is about it. Ya-a-a-gh!"

"Hello, Mr. Triangle, is that you?" called out the sport who had handled him so severely in the saloon; "how do you do? Glad to see you again. If you men of Boot Heel are pining to eat us, I shall be more than happy to offer myself to you as an especial tid-bit. I will not promise you, however, that I will be easy to digest."

"I'll take keer o' you, my hummin'-bird, an' don't ye fergit it," the blower cried; but it was noticed that he was not so anxious to get to the front as he had been.

"Well, what do you intend to do about it?" asked the colonel.

"What do we intend ter do 'bout it, hey? Wal, ez near ez we kin figger we intend ter go right on ter th' town. We never stood in th' way o' your goin' to Boot Heel, an' thar's no reason why you should stand in th' way o' our goin' ter Pot Leg. If ye try ter stop us thar'll be some moosic in ther air, sure pop."

"We never go to Boot Heel in a body with the avowed intention of burning you out, and seldom go there anyhow," answered one of the Pot Leg citizens.

"Which means ter say thet we do, eh?" the drunken leader demanded.

"You kain't deny what we heerd," returned Nebraska Nate.

"And to save trouble and bloodshed, and it may be life," warned the colonel, "you had better turn right face about and go back. We do not want any trouble, but we are determined to defend our homes at the risk of our lives. You can't get through here alive, and the only sensible thing for you to do is to retreat."

"Thar's big chunks o' sound sense in that leetle piece o' advice," declared Nebraska Nate, "an' if ye've got any hoss-sense at all in yer heads, ye'll take it."

"Wa-a-a-gh!" howled the great Triangle, "ye kain't skeer us, nary time. We've kem ter pay ye a friendly visit, an' if ye won't let it be a friendly one, ye must take it as ye git it. Who-o-oop!"

"Shall we pitch inter 'em?" the impatient men of Pot Leg asked of the colonel.

"No," the colonel answered, "the fight is theirs and not ours. We will let them go away in peace if they will have it so. We are men of peace, I hope, and we will not go to harsh measures unless they force it upon us."

This was all said in a low tone, and at the same time the enemy were holding a consultation.

But theirs was of short duration, and it ended very abruptly with a wild whoop and a volley of pistol-shots. In an instant the whole crowd rushed forward to the attack, and several of the men of Pot Leg were brought to the ground.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE BATTLE AND VICTORY.

THIS decided the course of the defense without any further delay.

With true military exactness of order, the colonel commanded his men to fire, and instantly the score of rifles belched forth fire and death into the crowd of would-be incendiaries.

With groans and yells the intended murderers turned and ran away in wild confusion.

And they left a dozen or more of their comrades wounded and dying upon the field.

Like true soldiers the colonel's men stood waiting for another order, but not so the general crowd of the men of Pot Leg.

With wild whoops they sprung forward and gave chase.

Down along the river ran the pursuers and pursued, all shouting like so many wild men.

"That is wrong," remarked the colonel.

"Why so?" demanded Nebraska Nate.

"Why, they evidently have enough and are in full retreat, and they ought to let them go."

"It won't hurt 'em ter git a full dose while they're about it," declared Nate.

"Nary time it won't," was the general opinion.

"They're a pizen lot, an' a good lesson it'll be to every one o' 'em."

"If they don't turn an' give our boys th' wu'st o' it," said one.

"It is my opinion that we had better follow them up a little way," said Walter Hapgood.

"They may turn as soon as they get over the first scare, and then as our friend here says, our boys may get the worst of it."

"There is something in that, sure enough," the colonel owned. "We will push on a little distance, anyhow. Some of you men must stay here, though, and attend to these wounded ones. We are not so inhuman as not to do all we can for them. They are fellow-beings, and brought this upon themselves, but they have strong claims upon us now."

"That is so," agreed Nate. "Who will stay?"

A dozen willing ones were readily found, and leaving them there the colonel and his men went on after the crowd.

They had not gone far when they heard the sound of firing, and they hastened forward to learn what was going on, and to lend their assistance if needed.

The narrow trail ran for quite some distance along the side of the river, and then it widened again into a little valley.

And it was there that the firing was now taking place.

The men of Boot Heel had retreated through the narrower part of the pass, and as soon as they came out into the wider place they turned and showed fight.

And there they had the men of Pot Leg at a great disadvantage. In fact, the tables were turned upon them.

No leader of armed men, knowing the nature of the ground, would have allowed himself to be led into such a trap; but these men knew little or nothing of the science of warfare, and it was no credit to the crowd from Boot Heel that they now had the better ground. Their retreat had been no ruse, and the men of Pot Leg could not be blamed for their eager pursuit.

Colonel Featherstone, however, saw at a glance the chance to display a little of the science of fighting, and when he and his men came up he directed the whole crowd to retreat.

There were some who did not agree to this at once.

"What shall we retreat fer?" they demanded; "we kin give it to 'em right heur, an' we will, too!"

"Yes, and they can give it to you right here, too," said the colonel. "Can't you see that they have got the better place? If you run away the chances are that they will follow you up, and if they do we can give them fits when we get to the other end of the pass. If they don't follow, then the battle will be over."

"Thar's hoss sense fer ye ag'in," observed Nebraska Nate. "Th' colonel don't talk nothin' else."

The men of Pot Leg very evidently realized this now, for already five or six of their number had gone down, and as many more were wounded.

Only for a moment did they hesitate, and then they all retreated in as much haste as had the others before.

"Wa-a-a-gh!" yelled the great triangle; "thar they go, fellers! After 'em now, an' we'll give 'em all they wants. We'll show 'em whether we won't go ter Pot Leg or not. Git right up an' go fer 'em now, an' we'll make 'em look weary in no time. Ya-a-a-ah!"

After them the Boot Heelers came, shooting and swearing away wildly.

"Hurry on, boys," said the colonel, "and let them chase us if they want to. They will soon get enough of it, I fancy."

"You're right they will," agreed Nebraska Nate. "We'll make 'em sicker this time than we did afore, I reckon."

On they went, and in a short time they were once more at their old stand.

And there the colonel halted his men and faced them about as before.

Up came the men of Boot Heel with a whoop and a yell, but they halted when they found themselves face to face with the drilled defenders.

"Halt!" cried the colonel, "or we will cut you all to pieces."

"Halt nothin'," returned the leader of the gang from Boot Heel. "We mean business this time, an' we're goin' ter burn yer hull town. We're after revenge this time, an' we're bound ter have it. Whoop! up an' at 'em! an' show 'em what we're made of!"

"You had better stop," Colonel Featherstone cautioned. "You will certainly get the worst of it. Our retreat was just to draw you on, and now we have got you just where we can do you up in short order. You had better retreat."

"Nary time," exclaimed the leader of the gang. "Come on, boys, an' we'll wax 'em hot an' strong."

On they came then, with a volley of pistol-shots as a starter.

The colonel saw that they would not take the good advice he had offered, and seeing also that they meant business, he once more ordered his men to fire.

And fire they did, and with deadly aim.

Ten or a dozen of the rascals were tumbled to the ground, but this time the rest did not stop. On they came with a rush, and then there was a fight in deadly earnest.

"Whoop! wa-a-a-gh!" yelled the great cyclone, as he rushed into the thickest of the *melee*.

"Now we're goin' fer ye, red-hot."

"Come right along, Thomas," invited Walter Hapgood, the sport; "you are just the boy I want to get hold of. I think I can take care of you while the rest of your gang are being done up. Come right here to my arms. I love you like a brother."

The sport made a rush at the great blower, and ere the blizzard was hardly aware of it he was lifted from his feet.

The great Triangle made a desperate struggle, but it was useless. The sport was by far the better man of the two, and he could handle the roaring whirlwind with ease.

The struggle was not of long duration, and when it ended it was with a suddenness that to the "striped zebra" was startling in the extreme. The sport got just the right hold of him, and with a quick and powerful fling threw him over his shoulder and landed him a dozen feet or more out into the river.

"Haw, haw, haw!" roared Nebraska Nate, who happened to see it all, "thar ar' war mighty well done. Guess I'll have ter serve this heur feller in th' same way."

Nate had just got hold of a man, and suiting action to the word he raised him from his feet and sent him to join the Triangle.

And just about that time the crowd from Boot Heel was in full retreat again. They quite evidently had enough to last them for some time.

As they moved away, though, they made threats the most dire that they would at some future day settle the account.

The men of Pot Leg tauntingly invited them to come at any time and they would try and make it pleasant for them.

The great battle was over.

And a serious one it had been.

There were no less than a dozen dead, while the wounded on the Pot Leg side numbered fully a score. Of the dead, three were men of Pot Leg, and one of these was one of the colonel's picked men.

It had been quite a fight, and one which the citizens of Boot Heel would be likely to remember for a while.

Finding that it was all over, the colonel hastened to send word to the Camp to that effect, and to let the women know that he and his party were all safe.

And then he set about caring for the wounded and the dead.

It was a sad affair, but the victims on the side of the crowd from Boot Heel had only themselves to blame. They had brought it all upon themselves, and while the colonel was sorry that anything of the kind had taken place, he could but feel thankful that his party had won the fight.

The wounded were all taken to Pot Leg, and there they were cared for as well as possible. The dead were taken there too, and the bodies were laid in an unoccupied house to await burial on the morrow.

During the night one more was added to the number of the dead, but all the rest were found to be better in the morning, and were in a fair way to recover.

Colonel Featherstone made a full and accurate account of the affair, and forwarded it to the sheriff of the county at the county seat by a special messenger. And to his report he added the particulars of the adventure with Sulphur Sam, and the fact that he had posted a personal reward for his apprehension.

No assistance was asked of the sheriff, but it was supposed that he would take some action in the matter.

During the forenoon the bodies of the victims of the fight were buried. Every care was taken to identify them and to preserve a record of their names, for, as the colonel said, evil and de-

graded as most of them were they must have relatives and friends somewhere, and it might be that at that very moment some mother's heart was yearning for one of them who would never more return to her.

The colonel held appropriate service at the grave, and more than one among those who listened were moved to tears.

It was a sad day, and it was noticed that there were some on hand who made their home at Boot Heel. Whether these had taken any part in the fight or not was not known, but it was thought that they would have a favorable word to carry home with them. They could see that though Pot Leg would stand none of their threats or allow them to intimidate them, yet they could be both merciful and generous.

CHAPTER XVII.

FRED SNOWBANK, BARBER.

DURING the next two days peace and quiet reigned at Pot Leg and Empire Camp.

This gave the party from the East a chance to look around and get a little better acquainted with the place.

The ladies of the party were by this time getting a little used to the excitement and peculiar ways, and moved around the town freely.

And they were assured of the protection of every citizen of the place.

Mrs. Featherstone seemed to improve daily, and she was more than delighted with the little valley and its surroundings.

As for the colonel and the young men, they were having grand times. There was plenty of game to be found in the hills, and the guide knew how to find it.

Nothing further had been heard from Boot Heel, and it was thought that the men of that town had decided to give the idea of whipping Pot Leg a season of repose. If so, it was a wise idea—an idea worthy of greater men than they.

If the colonel and the young men of the party were having grand times, so were the young ladies. They had each a horse, and were very fond of riding, and while they did not venture far away from the town alone, they had the whole range of the valley at their pleasure.

And when we say "the young ladies" we include Pansy Mayflower.

She was more like a companion equal to Miss Featherstone than like a servant. And whatever pleasures the mistress enjoyed, the maid enjoyed them with her.

On a previous page mention has been made of an undercurrent of love among the young people of the Camp. And there it was stated that if Pansy had no lover it was no fault of hers. If she had no lovers, was added, she had admirers, and among them were Chauncey DeBrown and Walter Hapgood.

And now there was another added to the list.

This other was one Fred Snowbank, a barber of Pot Leg.

Fred was a young man of twenty-two, quite good-looking, but he was as thin as a prize skeleton in a dime museum, almost. He was always carefully dressed, and was called the dude barber of the town.

And this dude barber had his awful eye fixed upon our Pansy.

Now Pansy, as has been stated, was a little given to flirting, and she led Fred the barber to think that he had made a conquest. That he had captured her little heart, and that he was the chosen idol of her life. That is, the barber was vain enough to take a smile and a playful nod now and then as evidence of the fact.

In truth Pansy was making all sorts of fun of him, and laughed whenever she saw him.

The dude barber was not slow to learn that he had two determined rivals in the persons of the sport and the Bostonian.

Of the latter he had little fear, but of the sport he stood in awe.

Now this dude barber was none too honorable in his way, and he resolved that if he could dispose of his rivals in any way, no matter how, he would do it.

Not that he meant to do them any bodily harm, for he did not; but if he could do anything that would ruin them in the eyes of the pretty maid, he wouldn't hesitate about doing it.

At first the idea came to him to spoil the beauty of the young man from Boston by letting his razor slip a few times when he got him into his chair; but reflection showed him that that would only serve to hurt his trade, so he gave that idea up.

Besides, he would not dare to try such a trick with the sport, and he wanted to serve them both alike.

As for Hapgood and DeBrown, they knew nothing of his evil intentions, and had no idea that any one in the town was planning against them.

They recognized each other as rivals, but they were good friends and were willing to fight it out in a friendly way.

And there was yet another complication. Sherman Mansfield had his eye fixed upon Frances Featherstone, and in his heart was determined to win her if he could. He cared nothing for the fact that she was to all intents

and purposes promised to Lucian Alanson. He wanted her, and if he could win her he was determined to do it.

And then there was the declaration of Sulphur Sam toward Myra Shelden.

Taken all in all, there seemed a fair prospect of trouble ahead of some kind.

But to return to the dude barber.

On the second day after the fight with Boot Heel, in the afternoon, the young ladies of Empire Camp were out riding, and Walter Hapgood and Chauncey DeBrown were with them.

Barber Snowbank saw them as they passed his shop, and as Harold Featherstone and Lucian Alanson were there too he jumped at once to the conclusion that the other two were attending upon Pansy Mayflower.

And he was not wrong.

"I would like to have them under my razor at this minute," the dude barber hissed, "and I would slice an ear off of each of them. I could not resist the temptation."

As he uttered the words he shook his fist after them in rage.

"Oh! but I will fix you both yet," he grated. "That fair girl was born for me, and mine she shall be. She has smiled upon me in a way that shows me that she loves me, and you two shall leave her alone. No doubt she is terribly bored with you, and will be only too glad to be rid of you."

It will be seen that Mr. Snowbank held himself in high esteem, and that he was not a little egotistical.

"They shall pay for this," he continued to repeat, long after they were out of sight, and he paced the floor of his little shop like a caged lion. "Here am I, shut up all day, while they can ride out with the idol of my heart—the light of my life."

The dude barber was taking it very much to heart.

And he continued to take it very much to heart until he saw them return, and then he took it to heart a great deal more.

And the more it went to his heart the more the idea of revenge haunted him.

There was one thing that hurt him badly, and that was that they—Hapgood and DeBrown—had the entrance to the Camp while he had not.

And that was certainly a great disadvantage to him.

But it was one that he could not very well overcome. He had no hope of ever being invited to visit the Camp, much as he tried to work himself into the favor of Harold and Lucian.

Mr. Snowbank boarded at the Bobtail Flush, as did Hapgood and DeBrown, and he made himself as friendly with them as he possibly could. He wanted their trade, of course, and he wanted to be above all suspicion when he found the means of doing them some injury.

On this night he found the opportunity to commit one of the most cowardly and mean acts of his whole life.

An idea came to him—an idea that at first made him feel ashamed of himself at the very thought of acting upon it; but when he thought it all over and saw how well it would work and help along his plans, he decided to put it forward.

It would hurt one of his rivals for a time, anyhow, and while he was getting on his feet again he would have time enough to knock the other down.

Mr. Snowbank was not a man who would fight openly, and had he had any idea that this crime would ever become known, he would have hesitated long before committing it.

But he had no thought that it could ever be found out who did it, and with that in his mind he set to work.

After leaving the ladies that afternoon the sport donned his hunting-suit, which was none too new and presentable, and went out into the hills with Harold, Lucian and Nebraska Nate.

The dude barber had heard them planning the hunt in his shop, and he knew that if they went where they intended going they could not possibly get back to town before it was quite late in the evening.

And it was upon this knowledge that he built his rascally scheme.

When he had eaten his supper he went up to his room. He generally took about an hour for each meal, and it was no unusual thing for him to do.

And no one noticed his going, for he chose the moment when he would not be likely to be seen. He first went out into the rear yard of the saloon, and then returning by way of the hall continued right on up-stairs.

Once up there he went to his own room, and then he began to look around with the greatest care to be sure that no one would see him.

Satisfied at last that no one was on hand, he slipped out of his room and hastened to the one occupied by the sport.

The door of the room was locked, but he had by some means or other provided himself with a key that would fit the lock, so he had no trouble in getting in.

Once in he locked the door after him, and

then made haste to carry out his mean and cowardly intentions.

He was greatly excited and frightened, for if the sport should discover him there he knew it would go hard with him. But he was determined, and went about the work he had planned.

With a keen razor he attacked the sport's wardrobe, and cut every garment into shreds. And not satisfied with that, he served his hats and boots in the same manner.

In about three minutes the deed was done.

And then, for a single moment, the fiend turned pale as he looked at the destruction he had wrought. The next moment, however, a satisfied smile lit up his face.

"It serves him right," he muttered; "and I only wish the other fellow's room was open, or that I could open it. I would serve him in the same manner. But his turn will come next."

Fearful of being detected if he remained there another second, and at the same time afraid of being seen in leaving the room, the rascal was in no enviable situation. It is the conscience of guilt that trembles, and the man guilty of a crime or a mean act is not to be envied.

With extreme care he opened the door and looked out. He found the coast as clear as when he had come in. He slipped out, locked the door after him, and in a few moments more was in his shop.

He expected that there would be a great fuss when the victim found out what had been done, but in that he was mistaken.

Next day Hapgood was seen still wearing his hunting-suit, but not a word did any one hear about the mean trick that had been played upon him. Not even did the manager of the saloon learn of it. And this only served to add fuel to the flame of hate that was burning in the breast of the dude barber.

CHAPTER XVIII.

STOPPING THE STAGE.

THE next day was the regular stage day.

Nothing had been heard from Twilight Charlie or Sulphur Sam since the day of the fight between Pot Leg and Boot Heel, but it was believed that this day would bring them out again, if they meant to stay on the road.

Stage day was a great day at Pot Leg, as it is at all the isolated towns of the wild West.

Everybody was always on hand on stage day if no other. And as the stage was the only means of communication they had with the outer world almost, it brought them the news of what was going on. It also brought the mail.

Long before it was due to arrive there was a great crowd at the Bobtail Flush, and as the time passed the crowd grew none the less.

With our privilege we will not await the arrival at the town, but will go forward and meet the stage en route.

It was a fine day, and the afternoon was running along toward night when the stage appeared at the summit of a hill about ten miles from Pot Leg.

There were not many passengers aboard, and they were half-asleep, and the driver was allowing his team to make their own gait.

Suddenly all this was changed.

"Hands up!" came a sharp, quick order, and a horseman with drawn revolvers blocked the way.

"Whoop!" cried the driver, as he roused up instantly, and he pushed down the brake and brought his team up all standing.

The man who had stopped the stage was clad in a black gown, and on his breast he wore a silver star.

It was none other than Twilight Charlie.

He was unknown to the driver, though, and in fact to all who were aboard.

"Sorry to trouble you," he said, "but can't help it, you know."

"What d'ye want?" demanded the driver.

"I want your wealth," was the answer.

"Wal, ye've stopped a mighty poor wagon this time, old hoss; we ain't wuth the trouble."

"Oh! never mind any apology," said the agent; "we can't all be wealthy, you know, and I am willing to take whatever you happen to have about you. I am easy to satisfy."

"What's ther racket heer?" demanded one of the passengers, putting his head out of a window as he spoke.

"Nothing very exciting, my friend," answered the agent, "if you take it cool. I merely want to collect a little toll."

Twilight Charlie held his weapons well up and all ready for business, and the men in and on the stage saw that he held the best hand.

"Reckon we might ez well give in," observed the driver.

"I reckon you had," said Charlie. "I do not want to have to kill a half-dozen of you, for I haven't time to stop to bury you. Come now, every mother's son of you tumble out of there."

"All right," said the driver, "out we comes, so don't git excited an' shoot when thar's no need o' doin' it."

"No fear of my shooting unless you force me to do so," was the cheery response. "I am one

of the most peaceable fellows you ever saw, and it would pain me deeply to have to do one of you an injury."

"Then you call it no injury to rob us, eh?" inquired one of the passengers.

"Bless you, my good fellow," the sport returned, "I couldn't do you a greater favor if I tried."

"Wal, we don't understand that, anyhow."

"It isn't to be expected that you would, clearly, so don't trouble your heads about it at all. All you have to do is to obey."

All had obeyed the order to get out, and all stood in a row waiting to be relieved of their wealth.

"Hand it right out, now, all you have got!" said the agent. "The sooner you do so the sooner you can go on, you know."

"Wal, if we must I reckon we must," observed one, "so heur is my leetle pile. I opine that you're Sulphur Sam, ain't ye?"

"No, sir," was the reply, "I am not."

"What! not Sulphur Sam?"

"No, sir."

"Then who be ye?"

"I am Twilight Charlie; or, the King of the Road, as some call me."

"Never heard of ye," declared the driver.

"Well, you know me now, and unless you want to see how well I can shoot, you had better make a little haste in trotting out your bullion."

There was quite some hesitation, but the travelers saw that the man was in thorough earnest, and at last they gave up their all.

Then the agent demanded the mail-bag.

On that point the driver wanted to draw the line, but the agent would not hear to it. He had stopped the stage to rob it, he declared, and he meant to do it.

The driver had to yield the point, and the mail-bag was handed over.

"Now," said Charlie, satisfied that he had pretty well cleaned them out, "you may go on. And if you chance to meet Sulphur Sam further down the road, give him the best respects of Twilight Charlie, and tell him you have already paid your toll."

"That all ye've got ter say?" asked the driver.

"Yes, that's all. You may go on."

The passengers got back to their places and the stage started on, leaving the daring agent gazing after it until it was out of sight.

"Well, that was quite easily done," the road-agent mused. "I guess I got the bulk of their worldly goods, and if they had any left I guess Sam will take care of it for them. And now I must away from here."

Turning, he dashed away at a lively gait, and was soon lost to sight.

The stage rolled on, and the passengers had plenty of matter for conversation. They felt greatly humiliated, but they could console themselves with the thought that they were not the first passengers who had been robbed, and were not likely to be the last.

They did not forget what the agent had said about the prospect of meeting Sulphur Sam further down the road, but they were inclined to believe that they had already met him.

They did not put much faith in the "Twilight Charlie" story.

It was certain that they had not heard of any such person before, and they set it down as one of Sulphur Sam's little jokes.

But it was not long when they had reason to change their minds.

They had gone but about three miles further when they were once more invited to hold up their hands.

And it was in no gentle voice that the order was given, either.

"Whoa! Hands up, there!" was the shout, and a volley of horrible oaths accompanied the command.

"Whoop!" shouted the driver, and once more he made a sudden stop; "up they is, mister, an' cl'ar up, too."

"Just see that you keep them up, then, or there will be mourning at your wigwam in the near future. Come out of there, now, every one of you, and be quick about it, too."

Out they came, without any loss of time.

"Heur we be," said one, "but I reckon it won't do you much good. We've been robbed as slick an' clean as a contribution-box."

"What!" cried the agent, "do you mean to say you have already paid your toll?"

"That's what we have, pardner, an' no mistake," he was assured.

This time the agent was Sulphur Sam. There was no mistaking him, for he had been often seen and his description had been passed around from place to place, so that he was readily known whenever met. True, they had at first taken Twilight Charlie for him, but they thought he was in a new guise, as they had not heard of any other agent on the road.

When he was told that the stage had been already stopped and robbed, the road-agent's rage knew no bounds. He swore like a pirate, and declared that he had half a mind to shoot them all just for revenge.

He thought better of that, however, and grew a little more calm.

"When were you stopped?" he asked.

"Not long ago," was the reply, "about three miles up the road."

"And who was it that stopped you?"

"Wal, he called hisself Twilight Charlie," the driver answered.

"That fellow again, eh? I will attend to him if I can ever find him."

"Why, d'ye know him?" asked the driver.

"No, but I want to know him. He is running in on my reservation, and there must be a settlement between us."

"Wal," demanded the driver, "be ye satisfied that we're givin' it to ye straight an' square?"

"Yes, I am willing to take your word for it, for this is not the first time that fellow has got ahead of me at my own game."

"An' be ye willin' ter let us go on?"

"Yes, get into your hearse and travel. By the way, though, what did that other gentleman of the road have to say for himself?"

"Wal, about th' only thing that I kin remember right well war his 'Hands up!'"

"Then he hadn't the cheek to send any word to me this time, eh?"

"Come ter think of it," said one of the passengers, "I believe he did give us some sort o' message fer you. What was it, driver?"

"Come ter think on't," the driver reflected, "he did say somethin', as our pard heur says, an' I think he told us if we seed you ter give his best regards, or somethin' like that, an' tell you we'd already paid our toll."

"That was it," the passengers all agreed.

"Very well," said Sam, "let him have his fling if he wants to; mine will come in good time. When I meet him there will be a settling of old accounts, or my name is not Sulphur Sam."

The passengers got aboard the stage again, and after a little further talk with the road-agent they started on their way.

And the road-agent turned and went on his, and as he rode away he muttered to himself:

"Twilight Charlie again, eh? I must try to meet him some time, and then we will see which is to be the king of this road."

CHAPTER XIX.

THE RIVAL AGENTS MEET.

A LITTLE later in the day two horsemen were riding along a lonely mountain trail about two miles north of the town of Pot Leg.

One was mounted upon a jet-black horse, and was clad in black from head to feet. He was completely masked, and any one who had ever met Sulphur Sam on the road would have recognized this as him.

The other was clad in a loose, black gown, and on his breast there blazed a silver star. He, too, was masked, and any citizen of Pot Leg would have named him at sight as Twilight Charlie.

Twilight Charlie and Sulphur Sam they were.

They were not riding along in company, but were approaching each other from opposite directions.

Neither had yet sighted the other, nor was either aware of the other's presence.

They were proceeding at a walk, and each was busy with his own thoughts. And the hoof-strokes of one horse drowned the sound of those of the other.

And the place where they were destined to meet was a peculiar one.

They were in a very narrow pass, and were approaching its narrowest part. And at that point it was impossible for two horses to pass. Just ahead was a turn, and before they came to that, neither rider could see the other.

And right at that turn it seemed that they must meet.

Both rode on, and as they neared the place of meeting both raised their heads to listen.

Each thought he had heard the step of another horse than his own, and each drew and cocked a revolver.

On they rode, and in another moment, Twilight Charlie and Sulphur Sam were face to face.

Up went their weapons at the same instant, and simultaneously they cried:

"Up hands, there, or you die!"

Neither could lay claim to any advantage, for both weapons were presented in the same instant.

And thus for a few seconds they sat in perfect silence.

The first to break the spell was Twilight Charlie.

"Ha, ha, ha!" he laughed, "this is a pretty fix to be in. I guess you don't want to taste of any of my lead, and I certainly have no desire to chew yours. What are we going to do about it?"

"Who are you?" Sulphur Sam demanded.

"I am Twilight Charlie," was the bold reply.

"Ha! I thought so. And now there has got to be a settling of accounts between us. What do you mean by coming here and running in on my trail?"

"Free country, Samuel," Charlie returned, "and I guess my right here is as good as yours."

"Well, we can't agree on that point, I fancy. One of us is one too many."

"That is what the citizens of Pot Leg seem

to think, too, and they are of the opinion that you are the one that can be spared."

"How do you know that?"

"Why, they have offered quite a sizable reward for you."

"And none for you, eh?"

"Not that I have heard of."

"And when were you at Pot Leg?"

"Not many moons ago."

It would seem that Sulphur Sam had not heard about Charlie's way of doing business.

"Well, what are we going to do about this little mess we have got into?" Sulphur Sam asked.

"We have got to get out of it," Twilight Charlie returned.

"Any fool would know that."

"Then why did you ask?"

"You will have to back out of this pass, so that I can get by," said Sam.

"Well, I reckon not," returned Charlie. "It will be a great deal nearer for you to back out than it will for me to do so, and I think it will fall to you to do the backing."

"Sulphur Sam is not in the habit of backing out of anywhere for anybody, and if there is any backing done in this case it will have to be done by you."

"I see you are not disposed to act fairly in the matter. If I were standing where you are, I would be willing to back out, for you have only a distance of fifty yards or so to go, while it is fully five hundred yards in my direction."

"I don't care if it is five miles, you have got to back out."

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Charlie. "You seem to forget that my hand is about as good as yours. I guess you will find that two can play in the same round."

"Then do you mean to say that you won't back out?"

"To put it straight—nary a back."

"Then you mean to say that I must?"

"Yes, unless you want to stay here all night."

While they were talking they were keeping close watch of each other, and each was watching for some hostile move on the part of the other.

Suddenly, and without the least warning, Sulphur Sam pulled the trigger of the revolver he held, and Twilight Charlie started as though hit. The next instant, though, his weapon spoke, and the one held by Sulphur Sam was sent flying out of his hand.

"Now," said Charlie, in the calmest of tones, "you back out of here, Sulphur Sam, or I will kill you and leave you here as food for the crows and buzzards."

The outlaw hesitated.

He was, in fact, too surprised to make a move.

"Don't you hear me?" asked Charlie.

This brought Sam to his senses, and he saw that the game was now wholly against him.

His right hand was almost paralyzed from the shock of the bullet that had torn his weapon from his grasp.

With many an oath he caught up his rein and began to back out of the pass.

Twilight Charlie followed up closely, keeping him covered with his revolver, and the desperate road-agent could find no chance to get hold of another weapon.

"You see you can't always tell just how the cat is going to jump," Charlie observed.

"This one trick does not win you the game," was the retort.

"Every trick counts, though," returned Charlie, "and this is one. I have come here to stay, and to stay for good. There is a hidden joke in that, but I do not think you can find it. Pay attention to where you are backing."

It was slow work to back out of the pass, but it had to be done. And Sulphur Sam was the man who had to do it.

To him it was very humiliating, for he had been having everything his own way for a long time in that part of the country.

He was a desperate character, and while he clearly recognized that he was in a bad fix just then, he was determined to turn the tables if he could.

And Twilight Charlie was just as determined to give him no chance to do it.

These two were well matched, and it was only a question of chance, as it may be called, which would come out ahead.

As soon as they came to where the pass was a little wider, Twilight Charlie called a halt.

"Now, friend Samuel," he said, "I have a word to say to you."

"Well, what is it?" was the rough demand.

"It is this: That I mean to take you to Pot Leg as my prisoner."

"Ha, ha, ha!" the outlaw laughed, "I would like to see you do it. You have the drop on me now, but there may be a change in the programme presently."

"You would like to see me do it, eh?" repeated Charlie. "Well, that is just what you will see, if I am not mistaken. There is quite a fortune offered in rewards for you, and I may as well scoop in the boodle as not."

"Do you mean to say you would dare to take me to Pot Leg, even if you could do it?"

"You can safely bet that I dare, and I intend to do it, too. Why, if I can land you safely in

the county jail, the people of this part of the country will rise up and call me blessed."

"Well, when do you intend to begin to take me there?"

"At once. Up with your hands!"

Sulphur Sam raised his hands as ordered, but as he did so his horse suddenly began to jump, kick, and plunge like a perfect demon.

"Whoa! Black Satan! whoa!" the outlaw cried, and seemingly he made every effort to quiet the beast.

The more he tried to stop its wild antics, though, the worse it became.

Twilight Charlie could only look on and wait for the end of the display of equine ferocity.

Sulphur Sam fought desperately to control the animal, seemingly, but it was all to no purpose.

"If you don't bring that devil to his senses soon," warned Twilight Charlie, "I will plant a bullet into it and see what effect that will have upon it."

At that instant the horse gave a sudden bound forward, and passing where Twilight Charlie was standing, it dashed away into the narrow pass at lightning speed, carrying the outlaw with it.

"Ha, ha, ha!" came back the taunting laugh of Sulphur Sam, and Twilight Charlie knew that he had been duped. The plunging and kicking of the horse had been caused by its rider, and the deception had worked nicely.

Charlie wheeled instantly, and started after the outlaw at breakneck speed, but he did not sight him again.

Sulphur Sam's horse could run like the very wind, and once he was carried beyond the range of Twilight Charlie's revolvers his escape was assured.

Twilight Charlie was in hot rage, but he was now all the more determined that he would capture the outlaw and deliver him to the sheriff of the county.

On he flew, as fast as his horse could run, but at last he saw that it was folly for him to pursue any further.

He pulled up, and then as he shook his fist in the direction in which Sulphur Sam had gone, he made the vow that he would have him some day, rain or shine.

CHAPTER XX. ATTEMPT AT MURDER.

ALL Pot Leg was out to see the stage arrive, when it became due, but half an hour passed and it did not come.

Next door to the Bobtail Flush Saloon was the post-office, and there the crowd was greatest.

Everybody was talking with his neighbor concerning the delay, and all were of the opinion that there had been another brush with the road-agents.

"You kin bet," remarked one, "that thar has been another diffikilty with th' road-agents, an' I'd like ter know how they made it."

"I hope they didn't git away with the mail, anyhow," said another.

"Which you kin bet they did, if they stopped the hearse at all," remarked still a third.

And so the talk ran.

The people of Empire Camp were interested, too.

Some of them looked for letters, and it was not very pleasant to know that they were cut off from the outer world entirely.

"Thar's no use a-howlin' till we find out what's th' matter," said Nebraska Nate, "but it's my opine that thar has been a scrimmage."

Colonel Featherstone and the young men of the Camp were there, and they were as anxious as any.

The colonel was no wise backward about declaring his intention to hunt down the outlaw, even if he had to bear all the expense of the hunt himself.

And there were a great many more who took the same stand.

"It is bad enough ter have ter divide once in a while with these gentlemen of th' road," observed one old miner, "but when they want all, then it is time ter kick, and ter kick hard, too."

"Mebby Twilight Charlie has stepped in and taken a hand in ther game ag'in," remarked one.

"I hope ter goodness he has," said the post-master, "if he has saved th' mail from th' rascals."

"Which you kin bet he didn't," said a bystander, "unless he got there first."

Presently there was a shout, and the stage was seen coming.

"Rah! heur she comes!" was the cry, and all who had not been out in the street before rushed out now.

Up came the stage on a run, and when it drew up at the post-office the first inquiry was for the mail.

"Ther mail is gone," said the driver; "cleaned out as clean as a whistle."

"What! yer don't mean ter say that ye've been cleaned out, do ye?"

"Sure thing, citizens."

"By Sulphur Sam?" was the next inquiry.

"It would 'a' been by Sulphur Sam, if he'd got

round a leetle sooner, but he war jest a leetle too late."

"Then it war Twilight Charlie?"

"That war his handle, I b'lieve," the driver confirmed.

"Rah! 'Rah fer Twilight Charlie!" was the instant cry, and a long, loud cheer went up.

"What d'ye mean by that, ye ijjits?" the driver asked in astonishment. "Ain't it about as broad as it's long? What difference kin it make to ye who took it, so long as it is gone?"

"It makes a big sight o' difference," said Nebraska Nate.

"I fail ter ketch on."

"Wal, th' truth o' th' hull thing is that Twilight Charlie is against Sulphur Sam, right from th' shoulder, an' when he robs a stage he does it jest ter block Mister Samuel's leetle game."

"Yes, but how does that help you?"

"Can't ye see?"

"Can't say as I do."

"Why, Charlie brings ther things ter town as safe an' sound as kin be, an' that is why we howl 'rah fer Charlie."

"Wal, I'll be jiggered!" the driver ejaculated, "that takes the front wheel. Who would 'a' thought it?"

While these remarks were being exchanged the passengers had got out, and they all listened to the story in amazement.

They could hardly believe they heard aright.

And then as soon as the driver had put away his team and all were gathered in the saloon the attention of those who had not seen it was called to the notice that Twilight Charlie had sent to be posted up.

This was something so new and novel that it was read over and over again until it was known almost by heart.

"Then there is hopes that we will get our money and other valuables back again, is there?" questioned one of the travelers.

This one was something of a doubter.

"There is just th' same hopes that a man kin hold when he is bettin' on a sure thing," he was told. "If Twilight Charlie got away with th' mail an' all th' rest o' yer goods an' chattels in good shape, ye kin rest yer mind easy that he will fetch 'em back."

"But why didn't he tell us he was on th' square?" argued the driver.

"Would you 'a' put any faith in any sich a story?"

This was a fair counter-question put by Nebraska Nate.

"Wal, I can't say as I would," the driver had to own.

"No, I guess you wouldn't. An' that's th' way Charles Henry Twilight looks at it. He figgers that th' only way ter save time an' trouble is jest ter make ye shell out without any words about it."

After supper, and when night began to settle down over the little valley once more, the saloon was again well filled.

There were other saloons in the place, but the Bobtail Flush was the best and it certainly had the most trade.

The men of the Camp were there, except of course those who had been engaged as watchmen. Of these there were now several, for the colonel and the others saw that they could not be too careful. The denizens of Boot Heel had shown their hands, and no one could tell at what moment there would be more trouble with them.

It was just a little after dark, and everything in the saloon was running along smoothly, when suddenly there arose a great shout without, and in a moment more a horseman rode boldly into the room.

A glance showed that it was none other than Twilight Charlie.

At once there was a general shout of welcome for him.

He was mounted upon the same horse as when last seen, was clad in the same black gown, had the star of silver upon his breast and again came with a revolver in hand.

"Good-evening, citizens," he said, "how do I find you to-night?"

"We're all cocked an' primed," was the answer he got from Nebraska Nate. "How wags th' world with you?"

"Oh, I am as happy as a big sunflower," the road-agent returned. "I am never so happy, however, as when I can do some fellow-sufferer a kindness. Here, I have brought your mail to you, and only for me it would now be on its road to the place where the wine-wood bineth. I do not say this to boast, but it is the truth. It is true also that I would have brought Sulphur Sam here a prisoner if I had been smart enough for him. I thought I knew a thing or two, but he taught me a lesson this afternoon."

"How war that?" was asked at once.

"Well, I took him prisoner," Twilight Charlie replied, "but failed to keep him after I got him."

"What! d'ye mean ter say that you took that feller prisoner?" demanded Nebraska Nate.

"I certainly did," the masked rider assured him, "but I wasn't smart enough to hold him."

"But, how did ye git him? an' how did he git away?"

Twilight Charlie told the story just as it

was, except that he censured himself quite a little for allowing himself to be outwitted so easily.

All who listened, however, agreed that he had done a remarkable thing, and urged him to make yet another attempt, in which they all hoped he would come out the winner.

"I do not mean to give it up," the mysterious rider assured them, "for I have vowed that I will arrest Sulphur Sam and hand him over to the authorities before I leave the road."

"Bully fer you!" was the shout. "Go fer him, Twilight, an' make him sick."

"Thank you. I shall try to do so. And now, allow me to return the valuables that were taken from the passengers of the stage this afternoon."

As he spoke the masked rider drew from under his gown a package, and he handed it to the proprietor of the saloon, saying:

"When I am gone you can restore the property to its owners. I guess they will find everything all right."

"All right," said Lang, "I will attend to it."

"Very well. And now, citizens, I have another word of warning for you: You had better be on the lookout constantly for the men of Boot Heel. They are not by any means satisfied with their defeat of the other night, and they will try to square the account in some way or other. My advice to you is to post sentinels around this valley, and especially at night, in order not to allow them to steal upon you unawares and do you up. I am satisfied that that is what they intend to do, but I do not know when they will act, and the safest way is to be prepared for them at any time."

"Thank you for the warning, sir," said Colonel Featherstone, "and we will try and give them a warm reception whenever they honor us with a visit."

"And next time they will have more cause to mourn than they had this time," added Sherman Mansfield.

"And if they know when they are well off they will stay away," was the general comment.

Twilight Charlie was about to speak again, when he gave a sudden start, as though a bullet had hit him, and at the same instant came the flash and report of a revolver at one of the windows.

"Ther skunk!" cried Nebraska Nate; "he must be captured. Out an' after him, men, no matter who he is."

All expected to see Twilight Charlie reel and fall, but after the first start he gave he straightened up, turned his horse, and dashed from the room.

CHAPTER XXI.

A BURST OF SONG.

It was a moment of great excitement.

Everybody made a rush for the door, following Twilight Charlie out.

When they reached the open air they saw a horseman tearing away up the street breakneck speed, and after him flew Twilight Charlie.

The rider who led the way was not so far distant when the foremost few of the crowd reached the street, and they recognized him as Sulphur Sam.

With wild yells the outlaw dashed away toward the canyon, firing his revolvers as he ran, and the whole town was in an uproar.

It was almost impossible for Twilight Charlie to keep on, for it seemed that no sooner was the alarm given than Pot Leg was out on the street and the way was blocked behind the outlaw as soon as he passed any point.

"Clear the road!" shouted Charlie, and many did; but there was a delay, and before Charlie could reach the canyon the outlaw had disappeared into its depths.

"It is no use this time," he muttered, "but my time will come, and when it does come I will know how to make use of it."

He returned to the saloon.

"Get away again?" queried one of those present.

"Yes," returned Charlie, "and as slick as grease. I did not get a fair chance at him this time, though, so I do not feel so bad about it."

"It was a close call fer you, I should say," remarked Nebraska Nate.

"It was indeed," the mysterious rider admitted.

"I thought you was done fer," observed one.

"No," said Charlie, "my time has not come yet. I guess I was not born to be killed by him. This is the second crack he has had at me."

"You want to look out for the third time, then," some one warned.

"I shall try to," said Charlie.

"My friend," said Sherman Mansfield, "will you not allow us to see your face? You are something of a mystery, and we are as curious about you as a set of old women."

Charlie laughed.

"You must excuse me," he answered, "but I cannot comply with your request. I enjoy the fun a little myself, and I want to carry it on to the end."

"I am sure that I have heard your voice before," said Colonel Featherstone.

"Then I must take more pains to disguise it," said Charlie, and even as he spoke it was noticed that he did alter his tone.

"And you still carry your revolver in hand, I see," observed Howard Lang.

"Yes, I am always on the lookout for trouble."

"But you do not expect trouble here, do you?"

"There is no telling when it will come. Some one might take a notion to unmask me, but I hope no one will, for I do not want to practice marksmanship if I can avoid it."

This raised a laugh.

"Well," said Charlie, "I will be going. I am glad that I have been of some service to you, citizens, and if I can defeat Sulphur Sam again I will gladly do so."

"What you want ter do is ter captervate him," cried one.

"And that is just what I intend to do if I am man enough to accomplish it," the masked rider returned.

"You have a big contract on hand, that is certain," declared Lang.

"I am well aware of it, but I shall try to fill it. And now I will bid you good-night and be going. If I go under, however, and you find my body in the hills, please give me a decent burial."

"That we will," was the cry.

"But you must take care and not git downed," said one.

"I shall try not to. And now I'll be off. Do not forget my warning about the men of Boot Heel."

"No, we'll bear that in mind."

The masked rider turned then and left the room, the crowd following him out, and the last seen of him he was dashing down the valley in the opposite direction to that taken by Sulphur Sam.

"That is a strange man," said Colonel Featherstone, as he and the young men set out for the Camp.

"He is indeed," agreed Harold.

"And it would be worth something to know who he is," added Lucian.

When they arrived at the main building of the Camp they found the women in a great state of excitement.

"Hello!" exclaimed the colonel, "what is the trouble here?"

"That Sulphur Sam has been here again," answered Mrs. Featherstone.

"Been here?"

"Yes, been here."

"And what did he do?"

"He had the audacity to throw a letter into Miss Shelden's room."

The colonel had to smile.

"Another token of love, eh?" he said.

"Another insult!" exclaimed Myra, hotly.

"What does he want this time?"

"Why," said Frances, "he has appointed a place and time of meeting, and wants an interview with her."

"And of of course you will grant it," laughed Harold.

"And of course I will not, then!" Myra cried.

"It is a shame that I must be thus insulted."

"There shall be an end to it," vowed the colonel.

"The rascal shall be taken if I have to hire a hundred men to do it."

"Then you had better employ the hundred men at once," said Frances, "and have the thing settled for once and all. It really is not safe for us to venture out of the house."

The letter that Myra had received the outlaw had thrown in at the window, breaking the glass as before, and at first she intended to throw it into the fire unread; but her woman's curiosity got the better of her and she read it.

It requested her to meet the sender at a stated hour next day at a place about a mile distant from the town, and assured her that no harm should come to her and that she should be escorted home at the end of the interview. Again did the outlaw declare his love, and he begged her to come and hear what he had to say and lead him to a new life.

"I think I shall go and meet him at the time and place he names," said Harold.

"Oh pray do not do so," cried Myra; "he might kill you. Besides, he adds a postscript to his letter saying that I must come alone. He says he will be on the watch, and if any one comes in my stead, he will not be seen."

"Then he will have to watch in vain, that is all."

"I rather think he will," agreed Myra.

While they were debating the question, there came a knock at the door.

A servant answered, and Chauncey DeBrown came in with his cornet.

"Ah! good-evening," he said, "I hope I find you all well. Mrs. Featherstone, how are you?"

"I am feeling better every day, thank you," was the reply.

"That is good, and I hope you will continue to feel better until you can say you are well."

"Thank you kindly, sir," said the lady. "I hope the same."

"I see you have brought your horn with you," observed Harold. "Will you not favor us with a little music?"

"If it will be agreeable to all," the young man consented.

"Oh, yes!" exclaimed the young ladies; "let us have a little music, by all means. We will have some singing, too."

So it was agreed, and there was a lively time at the Camp until a late hour, all enjoying themselves immensely.

Chauncey DeBrown was good company, and Walter Hapgood, who came in during the evening, was full of life and fun.

The colonel and Mrs. Featherstone, too, joined in the spirit of fun, and the evening was a jolly one indeed.

At last the time came when they all felt satisfied, however, and the music and singing ceased; and then as the hour was late, as said, Chauncey and Walter were about to take their leave, when all were startled by a sudden outburst of song without.

The windows of the building being all closed tightly, no light could be seen on the outside, and any one passing would naturally think—now that the singing was over—that the household was in slumber-land.

All listened, and this is what they heard:

"Oh! radiant are thy eyes, my own;
With soulful thoughts they gleam;
Well may they seem to e beacon-light
To guide us o'er the stream
Of dark despair and cank'ring plot,
And seat us on the throne
Where thou dost sit in lofty state
To rule thy chosen own.

"Thy cheeks are like the red, red rose,
Thy teeth are rows of pearl;
To hold thy little hand in mine
I'd give the world sweet girl;
To clasp thee in my arms, my sweet,
I'd risk my hopes of Heaven;
Oh! let me bow down at thy feet
This moonlit—lovelit even.

"Oh! would that I might walk with thee
Out in this silent hour;
To clasp thee to this heart so free
And breathe my love with power;
To press thy lips to mine, my love,
And kiss them o'er and o'er;
To feel thy heart beat 'gainst my own,
Then kiss thy lips some more.

"Oh! won't you come with me, my love?
The night is summer's own;
We'll have a walk, a pleasing talk,
All in a nook unknown.
Yes; come with me, my little dear,
We'll fly life's aching ills;
How nice 'twill be for you and me
To wander 'mong the hills!"

CHAPTER XXII.

A TILT WITH THE BARBER.

ALL within the house listened attentively and patiently to the end.

"Who in the world can that be?" questioned Miss Featherstone.

"I'll bet it is the dude barber," said Walter Hapgood.

"It was most certainly a barbarous effort," declared Harold.

"Oh! wo-ho-ho! you come with me-e-he my lo-ho-ho-o-ove!" hummed Lucian Alanson.

"I wonder who he means?" remarked Pansy Mayflower demurely.

"Who indeed, but you!" returned Miss Shelden.

"Me!"

"Yes, you. Haven't you been boasting that you had him 'on a string'?"

"Goodness me! Why, I was only in fun."

"And perhaps he is only in fun too," said Frances.

It was the barber.

He could play the guitar a little, and having spent nearly the whole day in composing his song, had now belloyed it forth to the accompaniment of that instrument.

Colonel Featherstone was hugging himself and laughing heartily.

"We ought to go out and give the fellow a cheer," he said.

"Just the thing!" cried Harold. "Come on and we will."

"Let's all get together," proposed Lucian, "and all step out at once, and we will break his heart."

All quickly agreed to the plan, and they were about to open the door when the barber broke out again.

This time his song was even worse than before. His audience listened in silence until he was done, and then the colonel threw open the door and all stepped out.

When the door was opened a flood of light poured forth, and the dude barber happened to be standing where it fell full upon him.

"Why, good-evening, Mr. Snowbank!" exclaimed the colonel; "how do you do?"

The barber was almost too surprised to speak.

Where he had expected to find everybody asleep, everybody was up and awake. And worst of all, here were his two rivals, and he had poured forth his soul in song in their hearing.

"I—I—I thought you was asleep," he managed to say.

"And perhaps it was better for you that I was not," remarked the colonel. "I tell you I would not like to be awakened by such yowling as yours."

"Such 'yowling,' sir?"

"That was what I said, sir," the colonel affirmed.

"Why, sir, I composed those songs myself, sir!"

"That was what we supposed when we heard them."

"I believe you are trying to make fun of me."

"Do not judge me so harshly. It is evident that you have made a slight mistake, and I am willing to overlook it. Our cook sleeps in the other building just in the rear of this one, and—"

"Do you suppose for one moment that I came to serenade your cook, sir?"

"I cannot imagine whom else, unless possibly one of the colored girls."

"Worse and worse! I am insulted! I came, sir, to serenade that sweetest and prettiest of beings, Miss Mayflower."

With a scream (of laughter) Pansy turned and ran back into the house.

"Do you mean that?" demanded the colonel in tones of thunder, while those who knew him well saw that he was ready to burst with suppressed laughter.

"Do I mean it?" the dude barber repeated.

"Of course I mean it. I would lay down my life for her. I—"

"Begone!" the colonel thundered, and he made a dart forward.

The dude barber wheeled and started for the town as fast as ever his legs could carry him.

And then the roar of laughter that followed him was more loud than agreeable—to him.

They all laughed heartily—they could not help it, the ladies as well as the men. And perhaps the colonel laughed the heartiest of all.

"That was about the richest I ever heard," remarked Walter Hapgood, referring to the songs.

"It was rich, indeed," the others agreed.

"And the richest thing about it was that we were here to enjoy it," observed Mr. DeBrown.

After some moments of conversation the sport and the cornet-player took leave of their friends and set out for their lodging-place.

They, too, were rivals, as has been already said, but they did not intend to let that interfere with their friendship.

Hapgood was the superior man of the two so far as mental capacity was concerned, and he had no fear that DeBrown could worst him in the matter; and DeBrown had the good sense to know that his rival was the better man, so far as physical powers went, and that he could gain nothing by making an enemy of him.

And for the dude barber, they neither one gave him much thought as a rival.

They chatted pleasantly as they proceeded to their boarding-place, and joked about the barber and his love-song.

Presently DeBrown opened a subject that had been giving him considerable of uneasiness all the evening.

"My friend," he began, "you will pardon me if I ask you a rather delicate question upon a vital point, will you not?"

"I guess I can safely assure you that I will," was the reply.

"Well, it is—and really I would not ask you, but I would like very much to know. It is this: Is it the correct thing to wear a hunting-suit to an evening reception out here?"

This was striking right home?

It will be remembered that the sport had nothing else to wear, and that was what he now had on.

Hapgood took it in good part and laughed heartily.

"Anything is good form out here in the wilds," he replied, "so long as a man behaves himself."

"I am glad to know that," said DeBrown.

"It is something of a nuisance for me to be putting on full dress whenever I go out, and especially so since I am the only one here who does so."

The Bostonian was living right up to the line as though he were at home and the social lion of the season.

"Yes," declared the sport, "your full-dress rig does look a little out of place in this part of the world, and no mistake; but I would advise you not to go to the extreme as I have done. I must tell you that mine is a case of necessity."

"A case of necessity; I fail to grasp your meaning."

"I have nothing better to wear. For once in my life I can join in the universal cry of woman—'Nothing to wear.'"

"And still I cannot grasp what you mean," said the puzzled man. "You certainly had plenty of clothes for other occasions."

"And I will have again, as soon as I can get them from Denver. But, I will tell you all about it if you will keep it to yourself. You see I am aping the women's way of keeping a secret, too."

"I will never breathe it, sir, never."
 "Very well. I will trust you. It does not make any particular difference, but at the first I thought I would make no mention of it to any one."

The sport then went on and told DeBrown all about the rascally trick that had been played upon him.

"Oh! the wretch!" DeBrown cried. "The villain! What will you do with him if you get hold of him?"

"It will not go well with him, you can bet," was the grim reply.

"I should think not."
 Hapgood had kept a sharp eye on the young Bostonian while telling his story, to see how he would take it, and now he was satisfied that he knew nothing about it.

"And have you no idea who did it?" Chauncey presently asked.

"I have a suspicion, but that is all. It will come out some time, though, and then there will be a day of reckoning, or I am greatly mistaken."

When the two reached their destination they saw the barber standing on the stoop of his shop just across the way.

They had no idea of speaking to him, but he hailed them and remarked:

"That was a pretty trick to play on a feller, now wasn't it?"

"What do you mean?" asked the sport.

"Just what I say. You must 'a' found out that I was a-goin' down there this evening, and that was all a put-up job on me."

"You're a fool," said the sport, plainly.

"I'm not so foolish as I'm foolish-looking, I'd have you to understand."

"Then you certainly have much to be thankful for."

DeBrown happened to catch this at once, and it tickled him so that he laughed heartily.

"And you, you dude," the barber cried, "you had better go back East as soon as you can get there."

"Do you refer to me?" DeBrown asked.

"Yes, I refer to you," was the snappy reply.

"Well, I am sure you need not apply your own title to me. I do not want to rob you of it, I am sure."

"Go into your den and go to bed," the sport advised, "and you will feel better when you get up."

The irate barber retorted hotly and told them to go somewhere else, and even went so far as to dare them both to come over and meet him in fair fight.

The sport accepted this invitation at once and started, but before he had taken half a dozen steps the barber sprang into his shop and bolted and barred the door.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE AGENTS MEET AGAIN.

HAPGOOD and DeBrown laughed heartily, and turned and entered their own temporary abiding-place.

"Do you know, my friend, that I have a suspicion?" remarked DeBrown, as they went up to their rooms.

"A suspicion?"

"Yes."

"And what is it?"

"It is that that barber is the man who served you such a mean trick as to ruin all your clothes."

"Do you think so?"

"Yes, and I believe I am right, too."

"Well, you may be, but time will tell."

So they parted for the night, and the whole valley was soon wrapped in slumber.

At an early hour next morning a horseman might have been seen riding toward Pot Leg from the north.

He was well-mounted, and wore a loose, black gown. On his breast he wore a star of silver, and his face was concealed behind a black mask. It was Twilight Charlie.

It was an early hour for a gentleman of the road to be abroad, for the sun was barely up.

At first his course seemed to indicate that he was going to Pot Leg, but when he came near to that place he turned and went out of the canyon toward the west.

Once out of the canyon he left the main trail and again made his way toward the south.

He continued on in that direction then until he was about opposite to the town on the west, and then he stopped and dismounted.

Then his first care was to conceal his horse.

Leading the animal down into a sort of gully or ravine, he tied the bridle to a tree and left it there.

That done, he returned to the place where he had dismounted.

There he looked around carefully to find a place wherein he could conceal himself.

It was not easy to find. That is, such a place as he desired.

After some little search, however, he at last found about as suitable a place as he was likely to discover, and accepted it.

It was a narrow space between two large rocks, and one entrance to the place was neatly hid by bushes and vines.

"There seems to be no better place handy,"

the mysterious rider muttered, "so this will have to do."

Pushing a small stone into place with his foot, he sat down upon it and prepared to watch the open glade that lay in front of his hiding-place.

Three hours later another horseman approached the spot.

This one was the black rider of the Yampah—Sulphur Sam.

He was clad in black as usual, was completely masked, and was mounted upon his well-known horse, Black Satan.

Stopping a short distance away from the place where Twilight Charlie was hiding, he dismounted.

"Well," he mused, "the time is up and the beauty is not here. Perhaps she does not intend to come. That is bad, for I love the girl, and I do not want to deal in a harsh manner with her."

Leaving his horse, he began to pace to and fro across the opening.

"Yes," he mused again as he walked, "I love her, and I will win her if it is at all possible. She shall be mine. I will not take no for an answer, and if she does not meet me as I have requested her to do, she will be sorry for it. I will stop at nothing."

He walked for a little time in silence, and then he began to talk again.

"She can play no trick upon me," he muttered, "for I have kept close watch of the trail from the town for two hours or more, and no one has come out this way, and my man is ready to warn me at an instant's notice of any danger that he may discover."

Another walk in silence.

"No," he presently mused again. "It is useless for me to expect her. The note I threw in at her window no doubt reached her all right, but the proud beauty would never agree to come out here to meet me, no matter if she loved me—as she probably does not. And it is hardly to be hoped that she ever will love me. But I love her, and that is all-sufficient for me. She shall be mine."

The outlaw was walking as he talked, and as he ceased speaking he was walking away from the place where Twilight Charlie was concealed.

And now the latter came out into sight, revolvers in hand, and when Sulphur Sam turned to retrace his steps he found himself face to face with his counterpoise, and the latter held the best hand.

"Hands up, Samuel," he cried, "or I will perforate you. I mean business, and you will find it out if you try on any monkey games."

The outlaw could only obey, as he had no choice in the matter.

In the wild lands of the Wild West the man who holds the "drop" is, for the time being, boss of the situation.

"Well," the outlaw demanded, with many an oath, "what do you want this time?"

"I want you, my dear boy," was the reply.

"Well, take me, then."

"Just what I intend to do."

"Don't wait to begin, then, but let's see you get right to business."

"All right; you keep right on holding up your hands, and I will attend to you in a very short time."

So Twilight Charlie said, but he knew full well that he had a big job on hand to make his man a prisoner.

So long as he held the drop as he had it now, all would be in his favor, but if he tried to secure his prisoner and disarm him, then there was a chance of his getting the worst of it.

He knew that he had a desperate man to deal with, and he had his doubts about being able to cope with him, but still he meant to do his best.

And Sulphur Sam, he had misgivings that he would not be able to escape this time as easily as he had done before.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," he suddenly announced.

"And what is that?" asked Charlie.

"I'll fight you, man to man, in any way you say, and have this thing settled for once and all."

This was a new turn of affairs.

"Why should I set my life up against yours?" asked Charlie.

"I do not know why you should, but that is what you are doing. You cannot take me to the town without a big struggle for the mastery, and I am willing to settle the thing in a fair fight."

"But I have the best hand now, and why should I risk losing it?"

"You can do as you please about it. If you prefer to tackle me in any other way, go ahead. You have the drop on me, and have a fair chance to kill me; but I do not think you want to do that. You would prefer to take me alive if you can."

"Yes," Charlie admitted, "I prefer to take you alive; but at the same time I will take you dead if necessary. It will be just as you will have it, in a measure."

"Then you refuse to fight me?"

"I did not say that."

"Well, then, let's come to business in some way or other."

Twilight Charlie saw that he had no easy job

on hand. He could kill his man if he would, but he did not desire to do that. Or, he could break his arms with pistol balls and so render him helpless; but neither had he any desire to do that.

The only other thing for him to do was to attempt to secure him.

Such had been his first intention, and he had no idea of changing his mind on that point."

Thrusting one of his weapons back into the belt under his gown, he drew out a pair of handcuffs with the same hand, and then he advanced upon the outlaw.

Stepping up close to him and presenting his revolver at his head, he said:

"Now, Sulphur Sam, put out your hands for these bracelets."

"Never!" was the response.

"Your life depends on it."

"I care nothing for that."

"Put out your hands or you die."

With a lightning-like move the outlaw did put out his hands, but it was with the intention of knocking the other man to the earth.

He did not succeed, however.

Twilight Charlie had been looking for some such move, and he dodged in time to escape the force of the blow.

Before he could recover from the push he had to stand, though, the outlaw had a revolver in his grasp.

And almost in the same instant there came a sharp report, and he had fired.

But, much to his surprise, his bullet did not take effect, and ere he could fire again Twilight Charlie was upon him.

And then there was no lost motion in what followed.

With a quick move Charlie dealt him a heavy blow on the head with his revolver, and with a groan the outlaw sunk down to the ground.

The victory was with the mysterious stranger who had so lately come upon the road to oppose the outlaw.

"Ha!" Charlie muttered, "luck is with me. And now to secure him while I have him in my power."

Kneeling down, he soon had the handcuffs upon the man's wrists, and then he proceeded to bind his feet.

When he was done he rose and put away his weapon, saying:

"Well, the battle is won, and now to take him to town and turn him over to the keeper of the town jail for a while."

Turning away he started down into the gully where he had left his horse.

CHAPTER XXIV.

SOME KINDLY ADVICE.

No sooner had Twilight Charlie disappeared from sight than another actor appeared upon the scene.

This was a rough-looking, brutal-faced man, a typical jail-bird in general appearance.

He sprang upon the scene from behind a nearby rock, and ran at once to Sulphur Sam's side.

He drew a knife as he ran, and when he reached the spot where the outlaw lay, he stooped quickly down and severed the cords that bound his feet.

That done, he next secured his horse and led it to where its master lay, and the faithful animal seemed to know just what was required of it.

It stopped and stood perfectly still, except that it put down its head and touched its master's face.

There was no time for the rough-looking man to delay, and he lifted the road-agent up in his arms as though he had been but a boy, placed him upon the horse's back, and swung himself up behind.

Then he turned the horse to the north and started away, making all the haste possible under the circumstances, with a due regard for caution.

In the mean time Twilight Charlie had failed to find his horse where he had left it.

He looked all around, but it was nowhere to be seen.

This was something he had not counted on, and it threw him out a little.

Of course he knew that the animal had not got away without help, and he drew a revolver and moved with more caution than he had shown before.

Where could the horse be? That was the question that puzzled him now. And who had led it away?

Hastening further down the gully, he presently espied the animal feeding.

It required only a short time then for him to hurry to where the horse stood and mount, but short as the time was it was time gained for Sulphur Sam and his rescuer.

These latter had gone only a little way when Sulphur Sam came to, and it seemed at first as though he could not realize where he was.

But it soon came to him.

"Did I get shot?" he asked.

"No," was the answer, "ye got a belt on ther head."

"And—Blazes! these handcuffs! Now I recall it all."

With the flash of memory came a burst of strength, and the outlaw sat up as quickly as though nothing had happened.

"Dismount," he ordered, "and take care of yourself. I will ride on, for that fellow will soon be after us if he has a horse."

"He had a horse," said the evil-faced man, "but I can't say whether he's got one now or not."

"Did you kill it?"

"No, but I turned it loose and let it go."

"Good for you! But, you had better dismount, and then I can hurry on."

"All right."

"And you must keep out of sight and hurry on as fast as you can, for you will have to file these bracelets off my wrists."

"I'll be right along with you as fast as I can come without being seen," was the man's reply.

He had dismounted while speaking, and now he turned away and the outlaw put the spurs to his horse and was soon out of sight.

As soon as he was mounted, Twilight Charlie hurried back to the place where he had left his prisoner, and there he met a greater surprise still.

The prisoner was gone.

It was a bitter blow for him, after all the planning he had done, and all the time he had spent to capture him, but it could not be helped.

Again had he had the outlaw in his power and again had he escaped.

"I will have him again," he hissed, "and then if he can get away it will be when I am powerless to prevent. But, I knew when I took hold of the task just what I had to expect, and I am not greatly surprised."

Of course he soon understood how it had all come about, for he knew that Sulphur Sam could not have escaped in so short a time unaided.

While he stood there thinking over his defeat he heard the sound of approaching footsteps.

Quickly he drew his weapon and stood on the defensive.

He remained quiet, and presently two men came in sight.

They were armed, and held their weapons ready for use at an instant's warning.

Twilight Charlie could see them before they could see him, and he recognized them as two of the young men of Empire Camp.

They were Harold Featherstone and Lucian Alanson.

When they approached the little glade they began to show more caution, but their caution was so blundering and clumsy that Twilight Charlie had to smile to see them. It was all too plain that they were tenderfeet.

In spite of their better judgment they had come out for the purpose of meeting Sulphur Sam, and the outlaw's man seeing them approaching, had run in to tell his master of their coming, thus arriving upon the scene in time to save him from being carried off a prisoner by Twilight Charlie.

Twilight Charlie was now standing where they could not see him until they came out fully into the open place, and the moment they did come out he shouted:

"Hands up, there, both of you!"

Up their hands went on the instant, with their revolvers in their grasp.

It is one thing to be armed and on the alert for danger, but it is quite another thing to meet the danger in true Western style. And this they were beginning to find out more and more every day.

When they looked and saw the star gleaming on the breast of the man who had thus hailed them, however, their look of almost dismay changed quickly to a smile.

"Ha," said Harold, "it is you, eh? We thought it was Sulphur Sam."

"And perhaps it is lucky for you that it is not," said Charlie. "What brings you out here without your guide?"

"We are here because we are fools," declared Lucian.

"I hardly think you are by any means fools," observed Charlie, "but it was far from wise for you to come out here with the idea of being able to capture such a man as Sulphur Sam."

The two young men looked at each other in the greatest surprise.

"How did you know that we came here for that purpose?" asked Harold.

"I have a way of finding out things that is peculiarly my own," the masked man answered, laughing.

"So it would seem. And I must admit that you surprise us, for we have mentioned our intention to no one."

So returned Lucian.

"And did you think that you could capture the outlaw?" Twilight Charlie asked.

"We were foolish enough to undertake it, and that is all we can say," replied Harold.

"Well, gentlemen," said the masked rider, "if you will pardon me I will offer you a little advice."

"We are sadly in need of it," declared Lucian.

"Well, it is this: That you should not venture out upon any such an errand as this without first consulting with Nebraska Nate about it.

And, until you are better posted, it will be well for you not to venture out without him anyhow. To address you in the figurative language of the far West—you are too tender about the feet for these rocky wilds."

"We admit it all, and we take the advice as kindly as it is kindly meant."

This last was said by Harold.

"And what are you doing here?" asked Lucian, addressing Twilight Charlie.

"Ha, ha, ha!" Charlie laughed, "you will smile when I tell you."

"Why?" asked Harold.

"Because, while I have been so free with my advice to you I fear I am sadly in need of a little of it myself."

"Please to explain."

"Well, I came here for the same purpose as you did. And I fared but little better."

"What! you came here to capture the outlaw?"

"Exactly."

"And how did you know he was coming here?"

"As I said before, I have a way of finding out things that is peculiarly my own."

"It is very strange," mused Harold.

"And did you see him?" inquired Lucian.

"I certainly did," was the reply, "and it is not very much to my credit that I say it, either."

Twilight Charlie went on then and gave a full and accurate account of what had taken place.

And the more they heard the more the two young men were puzzled to guess who this strange young person could be. He seemed to know all that was going on at the Camp, and was fully posted on all that was going on at Pot Leg.

When he was done with his own story, then the mysterious gentleman of the road inquired:

"And now may I ask how you came to know that Sulphur Sam would be here this morning?"

"We might give the same answer that you did," answered Harold, "but I will tell you all about it, since you have been so frank with us."

Harold then gave a full account of all that had lately taken place at Pot Leg and the Camp.

Twilight Charlie having shown himself to be on the side of honesty, and against the outlaw, everybody at the town was his friend, and the young men had no reason to keep anything back.

After quite a little conversation the masked rider took his leave of his two friends, and they returned to the town. They had learned one lesson at least, and they were resolved that they would not again venture upon such an errand alone. They now had even a clearer idea than ever of what a desperate character Sulphur Sam really was.

CHAPTER XXV.

DEBROWN'S REVENGE.

FOR some days then nothing of importance happened.

Everything at Pot Leg and Empire Camp ran along smoothly, and nothing was heard of either Sulphur Sam or the citizens of Boot Heel.

The party at Empire Camp were by this time getting well used to the ways and manners of the wild West, and were enjoying their new way of life immensely.

Mrs. Featherstone was undoubtedly returning to health as rapidly as was possible, and all the others were highly pleased with the change in her appearance.

Despite her position, Pansy Mayflower was the queen of the valley.

Being fancy free, she attracted more general attention than either or both of the other young ladies.

And no one was more thoroughly captivated by her pretty face and winning ways than Fred Snowbank, the little dude barber.

He was, as the other young men said of him, completely gone.

On the morning after the serenade he sent Pansy written copies of the songs, with a note explaining that they were his own compositions. He believed, he said that she would be glad to have them, and that she would always keep them near her.

This created a good deal of fun at the Camp, and every now and then some one of the party would break out with—

"Oh! wo-ho! you come with me-e-he my lo-ho-o-ove."

The tune was rather catching, and it did not take many days for the song to run through the town like a batch of measles. Everybody sung it, and it was ringing in the little barber's ears night and day.

Fred bore up well under the strain, and even took to poetry, sending Pansy one or more heart-rending effusions every day.

The barber had a wholesome fear of Walter Hapgood, and had little to say to or about him, but he pitched into Chauncey DeBrown whenever he found the chance.

He, the barber, was something of an artist in a crude way, and it was his delight to make drawings of a man with a cornet or trombone or something in that line and send them over to DeBrown.

The latter paid no attention to them at first, and the barber got but little satisfaction out of his work.

Mr. Snowbank had given up his room in the Bobtail Flush, and was now lodging in his shop. This change he had undoubtedly made for the purpose of getting away from the danger of a thrashing at the hands of his rivals in love.

Walter Hapgood was pretty well satisfied that it was the barber who had served him the despicable trick of which mention has been made, but he did not want to take any action in the matter until he could be certain.

DeBrown, as stated, put up very patiently with the freaks and insults of the dude barber, but at last patience ceased to be a virtue and he began to look around for some means of revenge in a harmless way.

And the straw that made the load unbearable was this: The barber painted and put up in his shop a large cartoon of the Bostonian and his cornet, and the likeness was so well drawn that it attracted a good deal of attention.

In such a place as the barber's shop, the picture was bound to attract attention to a great degree, and DeBrown heard of it wherever he went.

And then it was that patience ceased to be a virtue.

He studied for some little time before he hit upon just the idea that suited him, but at last he found it, and then he set about putting it in effect at once.

He would try to beat the dude barber at his own game.

Not that he was anything of an artist, for he was not; but he thought he could compose a song if he tried, and if he could make up one that he thought would sting the barber a little, he would sing it in the saloon.

He set to work, and in a day or two had created what he thought was a pretty good thing.

What he wanted was an attractive array of words, something that would find favor with the public, and a tune for the words that would strike the popular fancy; and when his work was done, he felt satisfied that he had filled all the conditions.

He had sung in the saloon several times, and was quite a good singer, and almost every evening that he made his appearance there, he was asked to favor the crowd with a song.

On the night of the day in which he had put the finishing touches to his song, he went into the saloon humming a lively air, and almost at once several of those present pounced upon him and asked him to sing.

It was well along in the evening; and the saloon was crowded, and in the crowd was the little dude barber.

"Well, my friends," said DeBrown, "I have sung almost everything that I ever heard, and—"

"No matter!" was the cry, "give us anything."

"Well, if you insist upon it, I will try and favor you. I have a new song, one of my own composing, and—"

"Rah fer th' new song!" was the shout; "let's have it."

"It is of my own composing," DeBrown repeated, "and I have named it 'The Barber Just Over the Way.'"

The bowl that went up was almost deafening, and everybody shouted for him to sing, while the eyes of the dude barber stuck out like door-knobs.

With a broad smile of satisfaction the Bostonian sprang up on a table, motioned the crowd to silence, and began:

"There's a barber just over the way,
Who plies his trade day after day;
His customers' faces
He artfully grace,
While his chin never ceases to play.

Chorus—"Oh, that barber just over the way,
Who scrapes away day after day!
How I watch with concern
While awaiting my turn,
Expecting him some man will slay.

"When once they've sat down there's no hope;
Their mouths he fills chock-full with soap;
Then whets up his tool
In manner quite cool,
And prepares with their tough beards to cope.

"His razor quite frequently slips;
A bit of flesh sometimes he clips;
His customers' noses
He gracefully closes,
While he works around over their lips.

"And they smell kerosene on his paws,
As over their faces he claws;
And they struggle for breath,
But he holds on like death,
While working down under their jaws.

"As over their faces he steers,
He now and then slices their ears;
When he slaps on a lotion
Which, they have a notion,
Would from a stone image draw tears.

"And he does them up brown with bay-rum;
Of infernal face-powder adds some,
Which he rubs briskly in—
To their now smarting skin.
Sometimes gouging an eye with his thumb.
Then he bids them sit up in the chair;
By this time they're 'most in despair;
Takes aold with a vim
And makes their heads swim,
And squirts axle-grease on their hair.
Then this knight o' the comb and the brush,
With these articles then makes a rush,
And winds up the text
And gayly cries 'Next!'
As another prepares he to crush."

At the end of each verse the singer repeated the chorus, and the storm of applause that greeted him when he was done was almost deafening.

As for the little barber, he did not tarry long there.

The song was voted the best thing the town of Pot Leg had ever heard, and DeBrown was not allowed to leave the room until he had sung it again.

Next day the song was on every tongue, and the ones the barber had created were all forgotten, or if not that, were laid on the shelf.

But the barber was not to be outdone, and once more the evil of his nature rose to the surface and led him into mischief.

He plotted the destruction of DeBrown's cornet.

An evening or two later, he found the opportunity he longed for, and prepared at once to take advantage of it.

DeBrown, Hapgood, and the young people of the Camp were out rowing on the river, and the Bostonian had left his cornet in his room.

The barber still took his meals at the saloon, and could go and come as he chose, and he lost no time in making an errand over there.

And then he did the same thing we have seen him do on one other occasion, namely: to steal up-stairs, enter a room, and there destroy everything that he could lay his hands upon.

The room was DeBrown's, and his beloved cornet was twisted and mashed into a useless mass of old metal.

This was sweet revenge to such a heartless and low-minded wretch, but if he could have known the rich reward it was to bring him, the chances are that he would have lost no time in getting out of the town.

CHAPTER XXVI.

PREPARING FOR ANOTHER FIGHT.

YES, the party at the Camp had a large row-boat, and on this night they—the young folks—were out on the river enjoying themselves.

Walter Hapgood and Chauncey DeBrown were on the best of terms with the people of the Camp, and were always invited whenever anything of interest was going on.

The sport, as Hapgood was called at the town, was the life of every undertaking, and DeBrown could always add to the fun—often at his own expense.

Starting from the Camp they rowed about a mile up the river, and then turned and drew in their oars and floated down with the current toward their starting-point.

And as they floated along they made the grand old mountains ring with song.

"It is really too bad that I did not think to bring along my cornet," remarked DeBrown, at the end of one song.

"Yes; this would be a good place to play it," the others agreed.

Little did the young man think that at that moment his cornet was no longer a thing of beauty and sound.

After another song they were drifting quietly on in silence, when suddenly they were hailed from the shore.

"Hello!" came the cry, and the voice was high and harsh, like that of an old woman with a cold.

"Who can that be?" questioned Harold Featherstone.

"Can the person be hailing us?" added Lucian Alanson.

"Hello! the boat!" came the cry again.

"That settles it," said Walter Hapgood; "he is calling us."

"If it is a 'he,'" observed Chauncey DeBrown. "It sounded to me like a woman's voice."

"Hello! the boat!" came the cry once more.

"Who calls?" shouted Harold.

"One who has a word of warning to give you," came the reply.

"There is something strange in this," declared Frances Featherstone.

"So I think," agreed Myra Shelden.

"Ask him what his word of warning is," prompted the sport.

"What have you to say to us?" shouted Harold.

"Stop your boat and listen," was the answer. Lucian and the sport obeyed this direction, and then Harold shouted:

"The boat is stopped, so say your say."

"There is trouble ahead for the people of Empire Camp. The men of Boot Heel are plan-

ning to burn your town, and there is no telling where they will stop in their evil work when once they get started."

"And who are you, that you know these things?"

"I am a woman from that town," was the reply.

"What do you think of this story?" asked Harold, turning to the sport.

"I think there is something in it," the sport answered, "and that we had better listen to what she has to say."

Again Harold called out:

"You say you are a woman from the town of Boot Heel?"

"Yes."

"When did you leave there?"

"Two hours ago."

"And where are you going?"

"I was going to Pot Leg, but now that I have warned you I will go no further. I have done all I can do."

"When do you think this attack will be made?" inquired the sport.

"I think it will be made to-night," was the answer.

"And do you know anything about their plans?"

"No, all I know is what I have told you, and now you had better hurry on to your camp. I must hasten my return, so as not to be suspected of having warned you, for it will be death to me if I am found out."

"Will you not join us and accept our protection?" asked Harold.

"No," was the answer, "I cannot do that; and I am not certain that you could protect me anyhow. You will have your hands full to take care of those you have now."

"Then you will not come?"

"No. And now I bid you good-night."

Nothing more was heard from the woman, and although the young men called to her several times, they got no reply.

"It is plain that she has nothing more to say to us," observed Harold, "and we may as well start for the Camp."

"Yes, that is the best thing we can do," agreed Hapgood, "and the sooner we start there the better."

"Then you believe the story we have heard, do you?" questioned Frances Featherstone.

"Yes," the sport answered, "I do; but I do not think there is much cause for alarm, for I think the town of Pot Leg can take care of Boot Heel at any time."

"Those horrid names!" Miss Featherstone exclaimed in disgust.

They lost no time in getting back to the Camp.

When they arrived there they hastened to inform Colonel Featherstone of what they had learned, and the Camp was soon in a state of excitement.

Nebraska Nate was called to the fore immediately.

"This hour is jest about what I expected," he declared. "Them thar pizen varmints at Boot Heel don't know when they are well off, an' they hain't got no better sense than ter come hear an' tackle us ag'in."

"And how are we to meet them this time?" inquired the colonel.

"Them same as we did afore," the old guide answered.

"Yes, I know," said the colonel; "but I mean how shall we prepare for their reception?"

"You think, then, that they won't tackle us jest ther same as they did afore, I take it," Nate remarked.

"You have hit it right," the colonel admitted.

"An' thar's jest whar ye're right," cried the old guide. "Now I don't perfess ter know anything erbout millertery tick-tacks, as I've told ye afore; but I do know suthin' erbout th' ways o' Injuns an' pizen outlaws, an' that counts fer a leetle to a case o' this sort."

"It certainly ought to, anyhow," the colonel allowed.

"Well, what is your idea, Uncle Nate?" asked Harold.

"Yer dad is th' best soldier," the guide returned, "ask him."

"Let us hear from you," interposed the colonel.

"Then ye want me ter say my say first, do ye, colonel?"

"Ye; let us know what you think about the situation."

"Wal, I'll do it. Now, as you said, colonel, it ain't ter be supposed that they'll tackle us jest ther same way as they did afore. That ain't accordin' ter th' natur' o' Injun, an' Injun an' outlaw is about th' same, unless it be that outlaw is a leetle th' wu'st. Now, my opine is that they'll send a handful o' their pizen critters up along th' river from th' south, same way they kem th' other time, an' that they will come inter the valley with a reg'lar Tommy Triangler whoop an' howl an' try ter draw us onto 'em; an' then when we go fer them th' main body o' th' rascals will drop inter th' valley from th' north or west an' give us fits. Them's what I think."

"You are a born general," declared the

colonel, as he clapped the old guide on the shoulder.

"I don't venter ter say anything erbout that," said Nate, "but I've been inter fights enough ter git th' hoss-sense o' th' thing drilled inter my head."

"And it is that that makes the general," the colonel added.

"Then you 'gree wi' me in my idee, do ye?" Nate asked.

"Yes," answered the colonel. "I do, and now what do you propose in the way of defense?"

"Wal, I think th' force will come down onto us from th' north, an' I think that th' main force should be th' strongest at th' end o' th' canyon. Thar we'll ketch 'em when they pour in onto us. Ther fust blow will be struck on th' south or th' west side o' th' town, an' then when they think we're goin' fer them, th' big gang will pour in an' try ter do us up."

"That is what I think, too. And now how shall we prepare?"

"That is fer you ter say, colonel."

"The trouble is," mused the colonel, "there is nothing certain about the information we have received. It may be a hoax, and if so we will be laughed at if we go to any great pains to defend ourselves."

"That is not the way to look at it, though," said Walter Hapgood. "We have been warned and if we do not take time by the forelock, and prepare for the worst, the laugh will be the other way if it proves not to be a joke."

"Right you are, youngster," agreed Nebraska Nate.

"Yes, that is so," the colonel admitted, "and you are right. Proper measures of defense shall be taken at once. Little did I think when I came out here that I should have to make a military campaign of it. There must be something back of all this, or the people of Boot Heel would not be so persistent in their attack."

"D'ye know, colonel," observed Nebraska Nate, "that I have been thinkin' th' same thing. Them galoots o' Boot Heel got enough th' other time ter satisfy 'most anybody but hogs, an' it seems ter me that thar must be suthin' back of it. Have ye got any enemy, colonel?"

"Not that I am aware of, Nate," the colonel replied.

"Wal, I can't understand it, then. But that don't make no difference. They want another dose o' fizzle, an' we must make ready ter give it to 'em."

"And there is one other thing to think of," remarked the sport.

"What is that?" asked the colonel.

"It is this: These men of Boot Heel are likely to come here a little more sober than they did the last time, and will no doubt give us a harder fight. For that reason we must give it to them hot the first round, and bring them to their senses with a rush."

"If they come sober," the colonel commented, "they may be all the more easily made to see the folly of their attempt to run us out of this valley."

CHAPTER XXVII.

BOOT HEEL ARRIVES.

No valuable time was lost, but preparations were begun at once.

Colonel Featherstone hunted up the men who had stood by him in the other fight, and with them prepared to go into camp near the entrance to the canyon.

Nebraska Nate, with another force, took up his position on the west of the town, where a trail led away into the hills; and Harold Featherstone, Lucien Alanson and Walter Hapgood, with a third armed body, stood guard at the lower end of the valley.

It was at this last-named place that the first attack was looked for.

Chauncey DeBrown again offered his services as a defender of the main building of the Camp, and there he was left.

Sherman Mansfield, who has been mentioned as a mine-owner at Pot Leg, had made himself agreeable to Colonel Featherstone all along, and had called quite frequently at the Camp.

He was a noble looking man, in a way, and the colonel rather liked him.

Mansfield had taken pains to let the colonel know all about himself, and in doing so he had an object in view.

That object was to win the hand of the colonel's daughter.

On this occasion the mine-owner offered his services to the colonel, and went into camp with him at the entrance to the canyon.

And as Mansfield had quite a number of men with him, he added to the strength of the defense.

It was midnight by the time all the arrangements were made, and at that hour the whole valley settled down to quiet, as though every eye was closed in slumber.

When Mansfield had disposed of his men to suit him, he went and joined the colonel.

"Well, colonel," he said, "we are ready for the enemy."

"Yes," the colonel agreed, "I guess we can take care of them now."

"I am sorry," the mine-owner went on, "that your stay here is being made so unpleasant for you."

"Yes, it is not very agreeable," the colonel owned.

"But I hope that there will be no more of it after to-night."

"And so do I. And do you know, Mansfield, that I think there must be something back of all this, to make the men of Boot Heel so persistent in their attempt to drive me out of the valley."

"You think so?"

"I do."

"And what do you think is wrong?"

"Very hard to determine that, but if I had an enemy I should think that he was now after me."

"Then you have no enemy, eh?"

"Not one that I know of."

"It is good to say that. If you have no enemy, however, you can rest assured that you have plenty of friends, and friends who will stand by you."

"It does me good to know that," the colonel responded, "and I am glad to know that you are one of them."

"I am proud to be so considered, sir," Mansfield replied. "And now, Colonel Featherstone," he added, "I have something to say to you of a rather delicate nature."

"Speak right out, sir," the colonel invited.

"I will do so. It is concerning your daughter, sir."

"My daughter?" the colonel exclaimed in surprise.

"Yes, sir, your daughter."

"And what about her?"

"I love her, sir."

"My dear fellow," said the colonel, laying his hand on the mine-owner's arm, "you are old enough to be her father. You cannot be many years my junior."

"What matters that, where love is concerned?"

"I am afraid it will matter a great deal," was the reply. "But, laying everything else aside, I believe my daughter is as good as engaged to young Alanson."

"That will make no difference to me, colonel," Mansfield declared. "Give me permission to address her, and I am willing to pit myself against him."

"I have no idea of refusing you the privilege you ask," said the colonel, "but I think it will be useless for you to do so."

"Thank you, colonel; and if I am successful, then will you give your consent to a union?"

"Of that we will speak later," the colonel answered.

Colonel Featherstone had no idea that any such union would ever be likely to take place, and he knew that it never would with his consent.

Sherman Mansfield was not such a man as he would care to intrust his daughter's happiness to.

"But," Mansfield persisted, "I would like to know how you regard the matter, colonel, for I would not wish to go ahead without a complete understanding."

"Then," answered the colonel, "I will be frank with you and say that I do not regard it with favor."

"But what is your objection to me?"

"One great objection is your age. But, let the matter drop for the present, for I think it is useless to talk of it. I believe I am safe in saying that my daughter's hand is pledged to Mr. Alanson."

"Very well," said Mansfield, "we will let it drop for the present, but I shall take advantage of the permission you have given me to address your daughter on the subject."

"Yes, you may do that."

After a further exchange of remarks in a friendly way, the two men parted and the mine-owner went back to his men.

And as he walked away he muttered:

"It is very well to bandy nice words with the colonel, and show him that I respect him in the matter, but I intend to make that girl my wife anyhow. And as for that young Alanson, I can get Lang to take care of him. Lang is a fighter, and he can easily lead him into trouble and then— Well, if he kills him it will be nothing to me, and he can easily make his escape, with a little help."

With these evil thoughts in mind, the mine-owner rolled himself in his blanket and lay down with his men, having first assured himself that the sentinels were doing their duty.

Two hours passed, and nothing happened to disturb the little valley.

At last, however, about half-past two in the morning the fun began.

Not a sound had been heard, and the first alarm was the rattle of firearms at the lower or southern end of the valley.

In one minute every man was up and at his post.

And now it falls upon us to describe what took place.

Harold, Lucian, and the sport, were at the lower end of the valley, and to them fell the first blow.

At the moment when it came the sport and

one other man were on guard, and they were attending strictly to their duty.

The sport was the first to detect the presence of the enemy, and he quickly passed the word to the others, calling them to their feet.

All the men moved in silence, and the crowd from Boot Heel was not aware of their presence there.

Not a word was spoken among the men on the defensive, and they waited to see what was to be done.

The men from Boot Heel moved up to the end of the pass, and there they paused and waited.

They, too, kept pretty still, and no sound was made that could have awakened the people of the valley had they been asleep.

For nearly twenty minutes the situation remained in just this way, and then was heard the yelp of a wolf away up at the opposite end of the valley.

This cry was repeated three times, and then all was still.

Nebraska Nate, away on the west side of the town, heard it, and said:

"Boyees, ther fun is erbout ter begin. That war th' signal, I reckon."

The men in the lower end of the valley answered the cry.

For a little time the silence held, and then One of their number repeated the same signal.

There was then another brief pause, and then the cry was again heard in the upper end of the valley.

Not a sound had been heard, we have stated above, but we must except these wolf-cries. These were taken, by most of those who were awake, as the real thing, and hence they were not heeded; but to those who were better posted the secret was plain.

But the first real alarm was the sound of firearms.

No sooner had the last cry in the upper end of the valley been given, than the enemy at the lower end sprung forward toward the buildings of the Camp.

And as they did so they began to shoot and shout like demons possessed.

But they were soon checked.

Up before them sprung the defenders, and into their midst was poured a volley of bullets.

There were not more than twenty or twenty-five men in the attacking party, and the moment they realized they had fallen into a hornets' nest, they turned and ran as fast in the opposite direction as they had started toward the Camp.

And after them for a short distance went the defenders, shooting and shouting as rapidly and as loudly as possible, and the noise they made was enough to lead them to think that the whole town of Pot Leg was after them.

And then the trouble began in the upper end of the valley.

When the fight in the southern end commenced, a great crowd rushed into the valley from the canyon.

But they came in silence.

It was clearly their intention to hasten to the center of the town and there to begin their work of evil.

But they were to be checked ere they had gone far, and in a way that would be likely to bring them to their senses with a rush.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE SECOND GREAT BATTLE.

NEBRASKA NATE, stationed on the west of the town, had his own ideas about the situation, and had taken up what he thought would prove to be one of the points of attack.

But for once Nate was mistaken, though his judgment had been good enough in the matter.

He had reasoned that that side of the town was the most likely to be the side chosen, on account of its being the least traveled.

The hour chosen for the attack, however, was so late that the canyon was sure to be deserted, and that was the better way for the Boot Heelers to come, as the trail that way was clear and plain.

But acting as he thought best, Nate had chosen the west side of the valley, and there had taken every possible precaution against a surprise.

He had stationed sentinels well out in the hills, with an understanding how to signal the approach of the enemy, and for a man who knew nothing whatever about "millerterry tick-tacks" he showed a remarkable degree of ability as a general.

As soon as he heard the attack begin in the lower end of the valley, he called to his picket-men—by signal—to learn whether any of the enemy were in sight or hearing, and being answered that all was clear, he called his men together and started at once and with all haste for the northern end of the valley.

And about the time that he started the fight began there.

Colonel Featherstone and his men allowed the Boot Heel crowd to get well into the valley, and then they went for them in all earnest.

The colonel and Sherman Mansfield had agreed upon a plan of action, and that they put into operation at once.

Their plan was to take the enemy on two sides at once, not shooting toward each other's men, but both parties shooting toward the canyon.

On came the Boot Heel men, in silent haste, when suddenly up in front of them, on two sides, sprung a small army, and the lead began to pour into them thick and fast.

For a moment they were panic-stricken, almost, but they were evidently determined this time, and after a moment's hesitation they began to return the compliment.

And then things were lively.

Rifles and revolvers flashed and cracked; men shouted, shrieked, and groaned; and in a very short time the whole valley was up and in arms.

The Boot Heel crowd stood it well for several minutes, but at last they began to fall back, and when Nebraska Nate and his men came running up, they broke and ran away like frightened sheep.

Into the canyon they rushed, and after them went Nebraska Nate.

"Come on, boyees," he shouted, "we must have one crack at them, if no more!"

Just within the canyon, however, the enemy made another stand, and there they showed good fight.

"Sock it to 'em!" yelled Nebraska Nate; "give 'em pertickler Hail Columbiar!"

"Come on, ye sickly-lookin' Pot Leggers!" cried the familiar voice of Triangle Thomas, the great whirlwind. "Come on, an' see how we'll do ye up!"

"We're perfectly willin' ter be did up," Nebraska Nate shouted back, "an' we're comin' right on ter give ye th' chance ter do it! At 'em, boyees, an' don't leave a red ha'r of 'em. I used ter be great at figgerin' on triangles, 'pothernooses, an' sich like when I went ter school, an' I got away with ther triangles every time. Reckon I'm good fer a few more of 'em, even if I am gittin' on in years. At 'em, boyees; at 'em!"

And at them they went, as though they meant to annihilate them.

It was fighting in the dark now, and Nate had to keep up a continual shouting in order to keep his men in line, and prevent them from doing harm to one another.

And in the rear of all, Sherman Mansfield had his hands full to keep those who were behind Nate from firing into him in their excitement.

In the height of the *melee* Colonel Featherstone had been wounded, and he was out of the fight now.

The Boot Heel gang held their place for a few moments, but they soon gave way again, and ran for their lives.

Nebraska Nate did not attempt to follow them any further, being well satisfied with the success he had already won.

Leaving four of his men there to guard the canyon, he drew back with the rest into the valley, and then he sent these to take up their former position on the west side of the town.

In the mean time the defenders in the lower end of the valley had routed the attacking force there, and had returned to their position.

They, however, had been instructed not to leave that post, so they could not go to take part in the trouble at the northern end, as the old guide had done.

At the southern post one of the defenders had been killed, and three wounded, of whom Harold Featherstone was one. He was not wounded badly, however, and could show nothing more serious than a bullet-hole through the fleshy part of his leg.

Of the Boot Heel party there, three were killed and one wounded, so that he could not get away. And there were some others who did get away.

But the great fight was at the northern end of the valley. There the great attack had been, and there the slaughter was greatest. And a slaughter it was, of necessity.

As soon as it was all over, and the enemy were gone, lights were procured and the wounded were cared for.

And as before, the wounded of the enemy were given all possible attention.

Colonel Featherstone was quite badly hurt, but his wound was not a dangerous one. It was not unlike the one Harold had received.

Some of the others, however, were wounded unto death, and many had been killed outright.

It had been no trifling affray, and had cost Pot Leg many a good man.

The loss on the Boot Heel side, though, was the greater. Full twenty men had been killed, and there were a great many injured ones on the field.

Colonel Featherstone was among the first to be cared for, and he was taken at once to the Camp.

The remainder of the night was full of excitement, and no one thought of bed. The state of affairs at the Camp can perhaps be imagined.

When morning dawned, it might have seemed like a horrible nightmare had it not been for the presence of the dead and wounded.

Colonel Featherstone called a meeting of the leading citizens of the town at an early hour, to determine what should be done.

The state of affairs had now assumed too

serious an aspect to be trifled with. It was clear that some decisive move must be made.

"Kind friends," said the colonel, when the citizens had gathered at the Camp, "I am extremely sorry that my coming to this valley has caused you so much trouble and sorrow, and I think that I had better take my leave as soon as possible."

"We won't listen ter any sich talk as that," interrupted one old settler. "We encouraged ye ter come heur, an' we means ter stand by ye. Boot Heel commenced this bad work, and now Pot Leg means ter carry it to th' bitter end. An' we want you ter stay right heur among us, an' see it out. If we can't take keer of ye we will sell out. That's my say."

"But if my going away will save any further trouble," the colonel opposed, as he tenderly moved his wounded limb, "had I not better go?"

"No, sir, ye hadn't," was the reply. "We mean ter stand by ye, an' it will never do to let Boot Heel git away with us like that."

"Well, then," said the colonel, "something must be done to put an end to any further trouble of this sort. What shall we do?"

"I think it will be well to send a messenger to the sheriff of the county, and demand his protection," advised Sherman Mansfield.

"That is ther idee," agreed Nebraska Nate, "an' let him go an' clean ther p'izen nest o' varmints right out. An' if he wants any help we kin give it ter him."

"That is what we will do," said the colonel.

"And I will act as messenger," offered Walter Hapgood.

"An' I reckon we couldn't git a better one," declared Nate, who had taken a liking to the young man.

While they were talking there arose a great commotion in the street, and looking out they saw a large body of the citizens of the town escorting a horseman toward the camp.

The horseman was a rough-looking man, and when he drew near he was recognized as Thomas Triangle, the "striped zebra" of Boot Heel.

He carried a white flag, and was evidently there on business.

"Whoop!" the rider shouted when he arrived at the Camp, and he drew his steed to a stop before the door of the main building. And then he announced:

"Heur I be, th' wu'st specimen o' my kind in ther world. An' I'm heur on business, too. I'm a flag o' truce, I be, an' I want ter see th' boss of this heur camp. I want ter hold a leetle speak with Kunnel Featherstone."

"This is something from the men of Boot Heel," said Hapgood. "Shall I ask him to come in?"

"Yes, tell him to come in here," the colonel directed.

The word was sent out, and the great whirlwind dismounted and entered the house to state his business.

"You come from Boot Heel, I believe," the colonel remarked.

"That's what I do," was the boastful answer, "an' I'm proud of it, too."

"And you come with a flag of truce, I understand."

"You understand jest right. I'm here from th' town o' Boot Heel ter state th' terms that lively burg will grant ye, pervided ye pick right up an' mosey out o' this heur valley at once."

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Nebraska Nate and the others.

"You seem to labor under the mistake that you came off victors in our little fight of last night," said the colonel. "It is rather amusing to have you come here to dictate terms to us."

"Ye kin laugh now, said the messenger, "but ye won't laugh long if ye don't take warnin' an' make yerselves skeerce heur inside o' twelve hours."

"What do you intend to do?" the colonel inquired.

"You jest read that an' you'll larn," was the answer, and the bully from Boot Heel drew a letter from his pocket and handed it to the colonel.

CHAPTER XXIX.

DEBROWN WAILS ALOUD.

Colonel Featherstone took the letter and read:

"CURNEL FETHERSTONE:—

"This here is to warn you and yur famby to luse no time in gittin out o' this here county. We mene biznes, we du, an we mene it. Boot Heel wassent good enuf fer you when you kem out here, an we donte mene ter let you sta at Pot Leg. You kin send us word what you mene ter du, an then we will no what ter du to, an we mene bizness."

"THE CUMITTY."

"Quite an interesting missive," the colonel remarked, with a smile.

"It will be more interestin' in a short while, if ye don't heed it," said the man who had brought it.

"It has been interestin' a couple o' times," observed Nebraska Nate, "an' we reckon we kin make it so ag'in; hey, neighbors?"

"We are of th' opine thet we kin," was the general reply.

"Wal, what is yer ans'er ter be?" Triangle Thomas demanded.

"Will you allow me to give him the reply, colonel?" asked Sherman Mansfield.

"Certainly," the colonel agreed.

"Very well. And now, sir," turning to the man from Boot Heel, "you may go back to your friends and fellow-rascals and tell them that we defy them. You are nothing but a band of cut-throats and robbers, and we are able to protect ourselves against you at any time, as we have already tried to show you. If you had good sense you would see that we can do you up in short order. And further, you are now warned that we mean to take steps toward breaking up your nest and ridding the county of your presence."

"That's all you've got ter say, eh?" Triangle Thomas sneered.

"Yes, that is all; and now the sooner you make yourself scarce around here, the better it will be for your health."

"Wal, I'll go; but you will see me ag'in, an' then thar will be moosic in ther air around heur, you kin bet."

"Let ther moosic come," invited the crowd, "and there will be some dancin' too, we reckon."

"An' afore ye go," said one, "won't ye go down to th' river with th' sport heur an' take another bath?"

The great Triangle thought it best to get away as soon as he could, so without wasting much time, and without tempting the men of Pot Leg to deal harshly with him, he mounted his horse and rode out of the valley.

It was now plain that the people of Boot Heel meant to push the thing to the bitter end, whether they got the worst of it or not.

Neither the sport nor DeBrown had yet been to their rooms at the saloon, and now that the excitement was over for a time, they repaired thither to take a little rest.

No sooner had DeBrown entered his room, however, than out he came with a wail that would have shamed the famed wailers of Babylon.

"What in the world is the matter?" demanded Hapgood, as the Bostonian rushed into his room with tears streaming from his eyes.

"My cornet! oh, my cornet!" DeBrown howled.

"And what is the matter with your cornet?" the sport asked, hardly able to resist laughing.

"Some one has mashed it all out of shape and ruined it forever," was the tearful explanation.

"Hal! it is that barber again," the sport unhesitatingly declared.

"And he has ruined everything else that I had in my room," added the heart-broken young man.

"If you will permit me to do so, I will go with you, to your room and take a look at the wreck," added the sport.

"Please do so, for I shall go mad if you do not," wailed DeBrown.

Together they went to the other room.

And a sorry-looking place it was.

The beloved cornet was a thing of the past, and other things were in no better condition.

"This is really too bad," declared the sport, in sympathetic tones, "and that rascal shall pay well for it."

"If we could only be sure that it was he," DeBrown wailed.

"In my own mind there is no doubt about that," assured Hapgood, "but we will do nothing until we can be sure about it."

"And what can we do then?" asked the weeping youth.

"We will make him wish that he had never been born," the sport avowed.

"Well— Hal! what is this?" and as he spoke, DeBrown sprung forward and picked up a pocketbook that lay on the floor.

"I saw that," said the sport, "but I thought it was yours."

"No, it is not mine," declared DeBrown; "it must belong to the one who did this evil work."

"Open it, then, and see if you can learn whom it belongs to."

DeBrown did as directed, and then exclaimed.

"It is the barber's!"

"Is his name in it?"

"Yes."

"Good! Now we have the dead-wood on him, and will take care of him."

"What shall I do with it?" DeBrown asked.

"See how much it contains," said the sport.

This was soon done, and it was found to contain nearly six hundred dollars.

"That is very good," the sport commented. "He will be able to make good the damage he has done, if he is the guilty one."

"But what shall I do with it now?" DeBrown insisted.

"Keep it for the present," the sport advised, "and perhaps he will be making some inquiries about it before long. By means of this pocketbook we shall be able to tell whether he is the guilty one or not."

"Very well, I will do as you say, and I hope we shall be able to get at the bottom of it. Oh! my cornet, my cornet!"

"You must make no mention of this to any one," the sport cautioned.

"How can I help it?" the young man inquired. "I shall be asked to play, and what can I say unless I confess what has happened?"

"That is so, too; but you can just say that your horn is broken and let that settle it."

"But what about the revenge you spoke of?"

"I will tell you all about that when I return to-night. I must prepare now for my long ride to carry the report of last night's work to the sheriff of the county, and then if we are not all murdered to-night we will try and see what can be done with the little barber over the way."

"Well, I will make no mention of my loss," said DeBrown, "and I hope with your help that I shall soon be able to learn who the author of the outrage is."

So they parted, and the sport prepared for his messenger service.

Making all ready, he took an hour's rest and then set out.

It was quite a distance to the chief town of the county, but the sport thought he could make the trip there and back in about eight or nine hours.

About the time that he set out the men of Pot Leg were again burying their dead, and it was a sad and solemn sight.

The dead of the enemy were treated with all the respect that was shown to their own men, for there was a Christian element at Pot Leg that was not to be found in many of the wild towns of its kind and size.

Now, as may be supposed, the women of the Empire Camp party were all for leaving the town as soon as possible.

They had had quite enough of the wild West to satisfy them. They wanted to move at once to some larger town where the law could be maintained and their lives protected. They thought they would rather turn to the regular tourists' course, join the common herd and endure being badgered by hotel keepers, rather than risk their lives by a further sojourn at the Camp.

But at present the colonel would not hear of it.

He declared that as Mrs. Featherstone's health was improving so rapidly, despite all the excitement she had undergone, he would try and fight it out there, now that the people of the valley desired him to stay with them.

He thought that the sheriff of the county would take a hand in the matter, and that all the trouble would soon be over between the towns of Boot Heel and Pot Leg.

Anyhow, it would be impossible for them to move at once, for they would have to send for their stage, and it would take some days at least for them to get started.

On the whole, he was in favor of remaining; and so was Harold, since both of them were wounded and would not like to be jolted over the rough roads.

Yes, they would stay there and fight it out.

Along in the afternoon of the same day, when the excitement had somewhat abated, the three young ladies of the Camp went out rowing on the river.

The river was nearer the Camp than was their usual riding route, and they thought there would be less danger in that direction.

They did not look for any danger, but they thought that under the present great excitement they would not venture far away from the house.

Rowing up the stream a little way, they would allow their boat then to drift down again as far as the starting-point, and then would repeat the trip.

And so they were passing a pleasant hour, when a remarkable thing happened.

They had drifted down to the Camp once or twice, and were coming down again, in the same way, when they fancied that their boat was going a little faster than usual.

What could that mean?"

Catching up their oars, Pansy Mayflower and Miss Featherstone tried hard to turn the boat up-stream again, but all to no purpose.

They became alarmed.

It was something that they could not understand.

They made every effort to stop the onward progress, but their efforts failed, and they were carried on.

And in a very short time they were around the bend in the river and out of sight of the little valley entirely.

Now thoroughly scared, they began to scream loudly for help, but on went the boat and no one responded to their cries.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE WORST BLOW OF ALL.

It was enough to frighten any one.

To be rapidly swept away down a river toward a hostile country, and not to be able to stop or even to explain the cause, was terrible.

It was not the result of a sudden increase in the speed of the current of the river, for they could see that that was the same as before.

Under similar circumstances strong men might have paled, and what was to be expected from three helpless girls?

In saying that they were drifting toward a hostile country, is meant that they were going toward the town of Boot Heel.

For some minutes it was impossible for them to guess the cause that made their boat drift along so mysteriously, but presently it was made plain.

And Pansy Mayflower was the first to discover it.

With a scream she called the attention of the others to it.

To the prow of the boat was attached what seemed to be a slender string, and that string stretched away to the opposite bank of the river.

Turning their eyes in that direction, they beheld a sight that chilled the blood in their veins.

On the bank was a man, running down along the river, and in his hand he held the string, and was pulling the boat along after him!

Seeing him, the three girls began to scream more loudly than ever.

And presently they were answered, and several of the servants of the Camp came running down toward them.

The supposed string on the prow of the boat was fastened just far enough back from the tip to cause the boat to keep its course, and it followed along with the man as he ran, going down the river rapidly enough, but approaching the shore but slowly.

When the men who came out in pursuit saw what the trouble was, they added their cries to those of the girls, but they did not stop. Instead, they kept right on in the hope of overtaking them and of rescuing them.

And it was not long when their cries brought others.

But still the man who was drawing the boat ran on.

"Cut the string—cut the string!" one of the men on the shore called out.

Frances Featherstone, the coolest of the three, sprang to do it.

And then she found that the string was a string of wire!

She tried to cut it with the little knife she had, but could not do so.

The situation of the three girls was now growing desperate. Those who were following them along the bank dared not shoot at the man, for the girls were exactly in

range, and none among the pursuers was a good shot.

And it did not seem likely that they could overtake the boat, for the man who was pulling it was a fast runner.

But the race was not of long duration.

A short distance ahead the river took another turn, still to the right, and on the left bank stood a horseman.

This horseman was clad in black from head to feet, and was mounted upon a superb black horse.

There was no star gleaming on his breast, and he was none other than Sulphur Sam, the bold highwayman.

At a signal from him, the man who was drawing the boat along suddenly dropped the wire and darted away into the bushes and out of sight, leaving the boat to go on alone.

And it was headed straight for the point where the outlaw was standing.

"See!" cried Frances, "the man has dropped the wire and run away! Quick! the oars! and we can escape!"

She and Pansy hurriedly dipped their oars and in a moment the boat was headed for the right-hand shore.

But they were already too near to the outlaw to escape him.

Things had not worked just as he had planned them to work, for he had expected his helper to get the oars away from the girls and in that case the boat would have come straight to where he stood.

With a muttered oath he spurred his horse into the water, and before the girls could get the boat under active headway he was beside them.

"I am sorry to disturb you so," he said, with mock politeness, "but I cannot help it. I found that mild means would not bring to me the woman I love, so I must take her by force."

As he spoke he threw his arm around Miss Shelden and drew her out of the boat and placed her up before him on his horse.

It was all done in so short a time that no one could prevent it, and the pursuers were still too far away to be of any service.

Myra fought like a tigress, but she could do nothing against her captor, and it did not take him long to swim his horse ashore and dash away into the hills, carrying her with him a prisoner.

When Myra was taken out of the boat, Pansy Mayflower fainted, and only for Miss Featherstone she would have fallen overboard.

Frances laid her down, and then with all the haste possible pulled the boat to the shore, where her friends from the town were approaching.

And she reached the bank just as the pursuers came straggling up.

"Into this boat, the best of you," she ordered, as she herself sprang out, "and cross the river and give chase to that vile wretch."

Pansy was just coming out of her faint, and she too was helped ashore, and then four or five men got into the boat and pulled at once for the opposite bank.

"And the rest of you," Frances ordered, "run back to the Camp as fast as ever your legs will carry you, and report what has happened."

Off the men ran, and Frances and Pansy hastened after them at a lively pace.

When the news was received at the Camp, Colonel Featherstone acted as though he would go wild.

And Harold was no better.

They both raved at the misfortune that had rendered them helpless, and both wanted to be up and doing.

If they were counted out, though, there were others who were not, and the foremost of the able ones was Nebraska Nate.

"By ther great toads!" the old guide exclaimed, "but this heur is gettin' a leetle too much o' a good thing. Now old Nate will take ter th' trail an' see what he is good fer. He ain't as young as he used ter be, but he is just as bootiful as ever, an' he has an idee—it may be a foolish one—that he kin bring Mister Sulphpeter Samuel to terms. Miss Frances, I'll take that leetle hoss o' yourn, if you have no objections."

"Take any or all of them," cried the col-

onel. "And make haste and bring that girl safe back to us."

"I'll do ther best I kin, you bet," the old guide returned.

"It will be five thousand dollars into your pocket if you save her," added Harold in excited tones. "She must be rescued!"

"She shall be fetched back if I kin do it," declared the honest old man, "an' now not another word, fer I'm off."

Leaving the house he hurried to the stables, where he soon saddled and bridled the best horse there, and then springing into the saddle with as much ease as a younger man might have shown, he dashed away down the river.

He had inquired the place where the outlaw had disappeared, and when he came to it he recognized it at once. And even had he not been able to do so, the boat lay on the opposite bank to guide him.

Urging the horse into the water he was not long in crossing to the other bank. And then he looked at once for the trail.

This was soon found, for the trail of a dripping-wet horse could not very easily be hid from sight.

Making sure that he was right, the old guide set out at as rapid a pace as he could maintain and still keep the trail in sight, and it was not a slow one.

In the course of half an hour he overtook the men who had started on foot, and they being unable to give him any information in addition to that he already had, he told them they might as well return, since they could not hope to keep up with his horse, and this they did.

And Nate went on.

The anxiety at the Camp was great. This was the worst blow of all. Harold Featherstone was working himself into a fever in his torture of mind; the colonel was little better; while Lucian Alanson was almost crazed to think of how little account he was in that wild land in such an emergency.

They could do nothing but wait and hope and pray.

It all depended on Nebraska Nate, as far as they could see, and their prayers were that he might be able to rescue the young lady before harm could come to her.

And now let us hasten on and see what the fortunes of Miss Shelden were.

When the horrible reality came upon her that she was being carried away by the outlaw who had declared his love for her, she fainted.

And nothing could have suited Sulphur Sam better.

Now he could partly lay her across his horse, supporting her enough to keep her from falling, and at the same time dash ahead at almost full speed.

And this he did.

He hastened on, taking no pains to hide his trail, and thus he continued for several miles.

All the time his course tended to lead him to the north. He was proceeding toward the east at first, but by making a half-circle he at length was going northward.

When he had gone some miles he at last came to a place where he stopped and waited.

He waited for some minutes, as though for some one whom he had expected to meet there, and then he whistled loudly.

In a moment his signal was answered.

Miss Shelden had long ere this regained her consciousness, but under the threats of the outlaw she had to keep quiet.

Presently a man appeared, running out from a narrow side-trail that led from the west.

It was the same man who had assisted the outlaw in capturing the young lady, and he was evidently ready for further work of the same sort.

CHAPTER XXXI.

DESPERATE COURAGE.

"WHERE have you been so long?" Sulphur Sam demanded, fiercely.

"I have been a-comin'," the man answered. "I have run 'most all ther way."

"You must have run most awful slow, then," the outlaw commented. "Here," he added, "take this girl now, and take her to the cabin, and see to it that she does not get away from you. I will go right on until I can hide my trail, and then I will join you."

Don't forget that your life is at stake. The girl must not be harmed. Do you understand me?"

"Yes," the man answered, "I understand."

"Well, then, see that you obey. And now away with you."

With Myra Sheldon in his arms, the rough-looking man turned and started away on the trail by which he had just come, while Sulphur Sam started onward in the other direction.

Miss Sheldon was by this time almost too overpowered by fear and excitement to offer any further resistance.

The man who carried her had not gone far when he was puffing and blowing as though exhausted.

And Myra did not enjoy being carried any more than he enjoyed carrying her.

"Put me down," she said, "and I will walk."

"Sure ye won't try ter git away?" the man asked.

"You will have to watch me, that is all I will say," the girl answered.

"An' I reckon I can do that, so down ye go. Now walk right straight, me lady, an' all will be well. I'll keep holt o' ye, jest fer luck. An' mind ye now, if ye open yer purty mouth ter holler, I'll stuff this handkercher inter it an' gag ye."

As he spoke the man displayed a handkerchief that, for dirt, could not have been equaled, and the young lady wisely concluded not to tempt him to put it into her mouth.

She walked silently on, and the man came close behind her with his hand upon her arm.

And as they walked the girl's spirits rose, and she began to think of planning to escape.

"Where are you going to take me?" she presently asked.

"To ther cabin where ther boss hangs out," was the reply.

"And where is that?"

"It hain't more'n a thousan' miles away."

Not another word was spoken, and after about half an hour's walk they came to a miserable little cabin that was hid away in the mountain wilderness.

At sight of it the girl's heart sunk within her.

Surely her friends would never be able to find her in such a place as this.

"You do not mean to keep me here, do you?" she inquired.

"You heerd what ther boss said," was the man's only reply.

This must not be, she inwardly decided. She must escape, if at the risk of her life.

First, however, she would try to bribe the villain to allow her to go.

"How would you like to be rich?" she abruptly asked.

"Now it hain't no use fer you to try that dodge," the man exclaimed, "fer it won't work. I'd like well ernuff ter be rich, but I valley my life a heap more'n I do riches, you bet."

"If you will take me right back to the town I will see that you are handsomely rewarded."

"Yas, an' yer friends there would see that I was handsomely hang'd. Oh, no! not any in mine, if you please."

"I promise you that you shall not be harmed."

"That's all right, miss, but how long d'ye think Sulphur Sam would let me live?"

"You could run away from him, and—"

"No, 'tain't no use; it can't be did, an' that settles it. Come, now, go right in there like a good leetle gal, an' save me th' on-pleasant trouble o' dealin' hard wi' ye an' carryin' ye in."

Seeing how completely she was in the man's power, Myra entered the cabin.

"An' now," said the man as he approached her, "it was th' boss's orders that I should tie yer purty hands as soon as I got ye heur, an' I'll have ter do it. Put 'em right out an' save all trouble."

"Oh! please do not tie my hands!" Myra cried in affright.

"It must be did," the man persisted, "so don't make any fuss about it."

He came a step nearer, and the girl drew back into a corner in terror.

"Now, don't cut up mulish," the ruffian

admonished, "or it will be all th' wuss fer ye. Hold out yer hands an' no foolin' erbout it."

Myra grew desperate. She knew that if once her hands were tied, she would be helpless, and she resolved to fight for her liberty now. Not that she could hope to overcome the man, but she would try.

"I will not allow you to tie my hands," she said in stern tones, "and I warn you to stand away from me."

"Ha, ha, ha!" the man laughed, "ye're quite a leetle fire-cat, hain't ye? But I kin take all o' that out o' ye. Now you hold out yer hands."

"I will not do it," declared Myra. "Stand back!"

The rascal heeded not the warning, but advanced upon her.

Myra knew not what to do.

Suddenly an idea came to her, and she acted upon it at once.

In his belt the man carried a revolver, and the instant he came within reach of her hand, Myra snatched it out and leveled it at his head.

"Keep off," she ordered in desperate tones; "keep off, or you die!"

The man drew back in haste.

"Oh! come, now," he cried, "give me that ar' weepin. If ye don't, I'll kill ye so quick ye'll never know what hurt ye."

The fellow spoke with all the ferocity of tone he could command, trying to scare the girl, but she was past that stage, knowing that her life depended on her coolness now.

"I will give you the contents of it," she said, "if you do not stand out of my way instantly and allow me to go."

She meant what she said, and the man could see that she had handled a pistol before by the way in which she had so promptly cocked the weapon and brought it to bear upon him.

"Gal," he hissed desperately, "ye tempt me ter kill ye! Drop that 'ar weepin an' hold out your hands."

"I will not do so; and now I will give you just ten seconds to get out of my way and allow me to leave this cabin."

It was a trying moment for them both.

The strain upon the girl's nerves was terrible, and the man stood in fear of his life.

Myra felt ready to faint, but she knew that everything depended upon the advantage she now held, and to the wretch before her she seemed like an avenging angel.

He drew away from her in abject fear.

That would not do, though, for he knew that it would cost him his life at the hands of Sulphur Sam if he allowed her to get away from him. He must risk everything to keep her there.

"Gal," he grated, "you are invitin' sartin' death. Drop that weepin instant, or it will be th' wuss fer ye!"

"And so are you invitin' certain death," the young lady returned. "If you do not move instantly I will shoot, and your blood be upon your own head."

There was a glitter in the girl's eyes that told the outlaw he must act instantly, if at all.

With a desperate cry, that was something between a curse and a snarl, he threw himself forward, with the intention of snatching the weapon away from the girl before she could shoot.

But he failed miserably.

There was a flash and a report, and, with a groan, the rascal fell forward upon his face.

"What have I done! Oh, what have I done!" the young woman cried, as she saw a red pool beginning to form where the warm blood flowed from the man's side.

With an effort the man partly turned and raised himself upon his elbow, and, looking at the girl, said:

"Miss, you hev hit me hard. Can't you do nothin' fer me?"

"Oh, I am so sorry!" the tender-hearted girl cried; "but you forced me to do it. What can I do for you?"

"Yas, I know that, miss, an' I desarved it; but can't ye help me? Can't ye stop this bleed so's I kin crawl ter some town?"

"I will do anything in my power for you, if you will only direct me what and how," Myra answered, tears streaming from her eyes.

"Take my knife, then," the man directed, "cut open my clothes, an' stuff a bit o' rag inter th' hole."

As pale as death and with trembling hands Myra followed the directions, with no thought for her own safety.

It was a frightful ordeal for one so young and inexperienced, but she nerved herself for the task bravely.

In a few moments the wound was laid bare, and the hot blood was seen surging out with every heart-throb.

Myra's reason told her that the man could not live, but she went on and did as he had directed. Tearing a piece from her fine handkerchief, she pressed it into the hole made by the bullet, and thus stopped the bleeding.

"Thank ye," the man said, faintly; "but 'tain't no use. I'm called. It was all my own fault, miss, an' you've nothin' ter blame yerself fer."

"Oh, why did you force me to do it!" Myra sobbed.

"Thar, thar, miss, don't take on about it, fer it was my own fault. Leave me ter die an' make good yer escape afore Sulphur Sam gits heur."

"Have you made your peace with God?" Myra asked.

"'Tain't no use ter think o' that at this late day," the dying man answered. "He don't know sich as me."

Myra knelt over the dying man, and in earnest tones told him of the Promise, and his face brightened.

"What you say is almost too good ter be true," he gasped; "but I reckon it must be so. Good-by, gal, an' God bless ye."

CHAPTER XXXII.

ONCE MORE FACE TO FACE.

MYRA SHELDEN offered an earnest prayer as she knelt there beside the dying man in the old cabin, and as she prayed a look of peace settled over his face and his lips began to move.

When she ceased, he opened his eyes and gasped:

"Miss, you have taken *this* life o' mine, fer which I was all ter blame, but ye have p'inted ther way to another. I thank ye fer it, an' may—may—God—bless ye."

And so he died.

As soon as all was over, Myra's courage gave way and she rushed from the old cabin in fear and trembling.

Nor did she stop until she was almost out of breath.

Then she knew not where she was nor which way to turn.

She was on a lonely mountain-trail, and completely lost.

Near where she had stopped was a little stream of water, and in that she washed the blood from her hands that she had got on them while ministering to the victim of her well-directed shot.

When that was done she started on, not knowing where she was going, but trusting that she would come out all right ere night overtook her.

And now to return for a mement to Nebraska Nate.

He was pushing steadily on upon the trail of the outlaw, and was putting forth every effort to gain upon him.

When he had come to the place where the young lady had been transferred to the man who had now paid the penalty with his life for his part in the outrage, he stopped and looked around to learn why the outlaw had stopped.

Unable to discover anything, however, owing to the rocky nature of the ground, he pressed on.

And on he rode until the shades of night began to fall.

At Empire Camp the friends of the abducted girl were almost wild with grief.

Another party had started out in addition to Nebraska Nate, but none of them had yet been heard from.

This was the worst blow that had yet fallen upon them.

The afternoon waned, and night came on, but still no tidings of the missing one were received.

Sulphur Sam, in the mean time, to return to him, had pressed on for many miles, until he at last came to a fork of the Little Snake River.

It was a shallow but rapid stream, and into it he urged his horse and followed its course for nearly half a mile in order to hide his trail.

When he left the stream he turned toward the south and headed for the cabin, where he expected to find the abducted girl.

He had made a wide and successful detour in order to elude pursuit, and now he was free to hasten home to the cabin.

The old cabin for the present was his home, and the only one he knew.

When he reached there he called to his man to come and care for his horse, and when he got no reply from him he knew not what to make of it.

"If he has played me false it will be the worse for him," he grated, and he dismounted and threw open the door.

The sight that met his eyes caused him to step back with an exclamation.

"Dead!"

His man was dead.

"What can be the meaning of this?" the outlaw questioned.

He looked all around to see what the indications pointed to.

"The gal has got away with him," he decided. "She had grit, but I had no idea that she could get up courage enough to shoot a man. That is the way it stands, though, sure enough. Here is his revolver, and—Blazes! if she hasn't tried to doctor him up!"

The brutal outlaw gave the body a kick, to assure himself that the man was really dead, and then turned from the cabin.

He swore roundly at the luck, but that did not help the case any, and he then set about looking for some trail or sign to show which way the girl had gone.

And presently he found one.

Along the path by which Myra had fled he found the remnant of the handkerchief that she had used in trying to stop the bleeding of the dead man's wound.

"This tells the story," he muttered, "and now to overtake her!"

Remounting his horse, he started off on the new trail, and while he could not find any real trail to follow, he used his judgment in deciding which course would be the one the girl had most likely taken where two courses were met with.

And so he kept on until it was near night.

The course he was taking was leading him from rather than toward the town of Pot Leg, but he pressed on, satisfied in his mind that that was the way it would be most natural for the girl to go.

And he was not mistaken for just when it was growing dark he met her face to face.

She had by this time become so bewildered that she did not know what way she was going, but at last realizing that she was going from the sun rather than toward it, had changed her course.

When she met the outlaw it was in a place where it was impossible for her to hide when she heard him coming, and when she saw who it was she uttered a loud scream of fright.

Since leaving the old cabin she had thought how unwise she had been not to bring the dead man's revolver with her, and now she fully realized how helpless she was.

"Ha! my little beauty!" the outlaw exclaimed. "I have found you again, have I? You did well to put my man out of your way, but that did not end the game. You still had Sulphur Sam to buck against, and you might as well buck against a stone wall. Now we will go back to the cabin, if you please, and there we will make each other's acquaintance a little better."

"Approach me at your peril!" the girl cried, fiercely.

"What will you do?" the outlaw demanded.

"Did you not see what I did to your man at the cabin?"

"And you threaten to do the same to me, eh?"

"Do not tempt me to do it, or you will learn."

"I admire your spirit," said Sam, "but let me remind you that I know you are unarmed, and that you are in my power. You did a foolish thing in not bringing that revolver with you."

Myra turned pale as she saw how well the man had guessed her secret.

"You can't fool me," the outlaw added, "and now the best thing for you to do is to come right here and take a seat on my horse."

"Never!"

"Oh, yes you will. You only think you won't, that is all. Come, now, and save me the trouble of dismounting and forcing you to do as I bid."

"If you will not be warned," said the girl, "you must take the result."

"And the result will be your pretty self," was the retort.

As he spoke the outlaw dismounted, and approached the spot where the girl was standing.

"Stand back!" Myra cried, and she held her hand under the fold of her dress as though she held a weapon in her grasp.

Sulphur Sam did hesitate, but then he reasoned that if she really had a weapon she would have displayed it ere this, and so he said:

"I am sorry not to obey you, but I cannot do it this time. Here I come, and now if you want to shoot, do so. Take aim at my eye and let drive."

Seeing that she had no way of holding her enemy at bay, Myra turned quickly to run, but just as she turned she came face to face with another horseman.

"This one, too, was masked, but he wore a loose, black gown, and on his breast there blazed a silver star.

It was Twilight Charlie, the King of the Road.

Sulphur Sam saw him about the time that Myra did, but he did not see him soon enough to hinder him from having the advantage.

"Hands up, Samuel!" he ordered, "or down you go. I will stand no fooling. It is dead or alive this time, and it makes little difference to me which it is. Up with your paddies, like a little man."

"You shall pay for this," the outlaw muttered, as he put up his hands as ordered. "I will show you yet that you cannot run my business."

"You may have an opportunity of doing so," the counterpoise remarked, "but I doubt it. You are going to Pot Leg with me as a prisoner this time, if I have to take you there a corpse."

"You kin bet yer life that he is!" cried another voice, and up rode Nebraska Nate.

With a cry of joy Myra Shelden sprang at once to his side.

"I am so glad you are here!" she cried. "I am tired out, and I am frightened to death."

"Not quite as bad as that, I reckon, leetle gal," Nate answered, "but I can't wonder at it if ye be. Never mind, though, ye shall soon be safe at home now."

Twilight Charlie had not taken his eyes from Sulphur Sam, but held that gentleman under the cover of his revolver.

"I see ye've got ther varmint, Charles Augustus," the old guide remarked.

"Yes," Twilight Charlie returned, "and I mean to keep him, too. I am glad you happened along," he added, "for you can take the young lady to her friends—who are, no doubt, greatly alarmed for her safety."

"That is jest what I reckoned ter do," said Nate, "but fu'st I guess I'd better help ye make sure o' this varmint, hadn't I?"

"No," returned Charlie, "for I will attend to him myself. I have made up my mind to take him, and I will."

"He is a mighty onsartain customer, though, Pard Charles Hennery, an' if ye will only let me help ye we kin make sure o' him in no time."

"No, I prefer to take him alone," Twilight Charlie insisted. "You take the lady and set out for the town, and I will try to take care of this gentleman."

"Very well," said Nate, "it is yer own do, so I'll go on jest es ye say. Come, lady, an' let me lift ye up onter th' hoss."

Nate then assisted Myra to mount, and they rode away.

"Now," said Twilight Charlie, "once more we have met, Sulphur Sam, and it is to decide which of us is the better man."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

SULPHUR SAM IN LIMBO.

THE two masked men glared at each other for a moment in silence.

And then Sulphur Sam spoke.

"I am willing to put it to the test," he said, "but it must be a fight to the death."

"I do not quite agree with you there," Twilight Charlie returned, "for if I get away with you I intend to take you a prisoner to the town of Pot Leg."

"Which you are welcome to do if you can get away with me," was the defiant retort.

"You have seen a specimen of my marksmanship, I believe," Charlie remarked as he dismounted, "and now if you move so much as a finger you will see some more of it. Hold your hands well up, and do not so much as wink."

Having dismounted, Twilight Charlie advanced straight upon his enemy and placed the muzzle of his revolver right under his nose.

"Hold your hands clear up," he ordered again, "and see that they do not come down one inch if you do not want a bullet into your brain."

At such a tight pinch the outlaw could not do otherwise than obey, and that he did with as good a grace as he could command.

Then Twilight Charlie disarmed him.

"Now," said the latter, we will put the thing to the test. I will lay aside my own weapons, and then we will fight it out man to man. Are you willing to do that?"

"Yes, I am," was the reply. "Drop your weapons and come on."

"Very well, here goes."

Having satisfied himself that the outlaw was indeed unarmed, Twilight Charlie laid aside his weapons and then advanced upon him.

"Now," he said, "come on."

At each other the two men sprang, catching as they could, and then the struggle commenced.

And a desperate struggle it was.

To and fro they wound, now one seeming to have the vantage and now the other, and they seemed to be pretty evenly matched.

Once Sulphur Sam got the upper hand, and it looked for a moment as though he would win the fight; but by putting forth every effort and straining every nerve Twilight Charlie recovered his lost vantage and the position was reversed.

But still the result hung in the balance, and no betting-man would have wagered his money upon one or the other.

So far as Sulphur Sam was concerned, it was a struggle to the death; but this was not so with Twilight Charlie. He was fighting to take his enemy prisoner.

After a little time longer Sulphur Sam began to show signs of weakening.

And then the fight took an entirely different turn.

Freeing one hand for a moment, the outlaw drew a concealed knife and made a mad thrust at his opponent's heart.

It looked as though the brave counterpoise would lose his life, for the blow was made with desperate strength, but strange to say the blade met some obstacle and was snapped in twain.

Twilight Charlie put forth another effort then, and dashed the outlaw's head on the rocky ground with force enough to partly stun him.

"There!" he cried, as he rose, panting for breath, "take that! I thought this was to be a fair fight; but here you have deliberately tried to murder me. Nothing better was to be expected from such as you, however."

Taking a pair of handcuffs from under his gown, he stooped and snapped them upon the outlaw's wrists, and once more Sulphur Sam was his prisoner.

Waiting a few moments to regain his lost wind, and to allow the outlaw time to recover his scattered senses, he then ordered the man to get up.

"If you want me up you will have to lift me," was the stubborn and defiant answer.

"Will I?" said Charlie; "I will see about that."

Taking a knife, he gave the outlaw two or three lively prods in the legs and soon brought him to his feet with a howl.

"I thought I could do it," the King of the Road remarked with a smile; "and now you will please mount your horse. Be quick about it, too. I know you can't do it very well with your hands locked, but I will help you."

There was no help for it," and the defeated man had to obey.

"And now let me warn you not to attempt to run away," said Charlie, as he proceeded to secure the man's feet under the belly of the horse by means of a strap, "for if you do you will find a bullet planted in your back before you can run a dozen yards. I want to take you to town alive if I can, but I will take you there dead if it is necessary."

Having made his prisoner secure, Twilight Charlie mounted his own horse, and taking the bridle of the other horse in his hand, started for Pot Leg.

He took the shortest way that was known to him, and urged the horses to a lively gait.

They were several miles from the town, and before they reached there they overtook Nebraska Nate with Miss Sheldon.

It was by this time night, and Nate was urging his horse to its best efforts, for he well knew that the minutes were seeming as hours to the anxious ones at the Camp.

As indeed they were.

Myra was utterly tired out, and was more than eager to reach the town and join her friends once more.

When Twilight Charlie joined them he said:

"Well, you may make your minds easy on one point, and that is that Sulphur Sam will not stop you to-night."

"It looks that way, fer sartin," observed Nate. "How did ye make it with him?" he asked.

"Well," said Charlie, "I got him, but he gave me a hard fight, and no mistake."

They talked as they rode along, and in due time reached their destination.

When they entered the town and were recognized, a shout arose, and in a few minutes the whole town was out to greet them.

Nebraska Nate pressed right on to the Camp, but Twilight Charlie turned aside and entered the Bobtail Flush Saloon, leading his prisoner after him, both mounted.

In their fight, Sulphur Sam's mask had been torn off, but that of his counterpoise had remained, being, perhaps, better secured.

Charlie, however, had returned the outlaw's mask to its place, and now the faces of both were concealed.

"Gentlemen," Twilight Charlie said, "allow me to introduce you to—or, rather, to you—Sulphur Sam, the black rider of the Yampah."

"'Rah! 'Rah fer Twilight Charlie, th' King o' th' Road!" was the instant shout, and every man in the place crowded forward.

"Show us his face," was the demand.

Reaching over, the wearer of the silver star caught hold of the outlaw's mask, and with a jerk tore it away.

The face that was revealed was that of a young man, passably good-looking, as far as could be judged, for his face was covered with a heavy black beard of about six weeks' growth.

And this was the great, the notorious, Sulphur Sam.

"Now, gentlemen," the mysterious counterpoise asked, "what is to be done with him? You must take care that he does not escape."

"We are hardly able to say what we can do with him, now that we have got him," honestly declared Sherman Mansfield.

"You have a jail here, have you not?" asked Twilight Charlie.

"Yes, such as it is," was the reply.

"Well, you must put him into that, then," was the direction of the captor, "and you must take care that he does not get away. Put a dozen men on guard around the jail, if you think it is necessary. I have done my part, and now it remains for you to do your part."

"That is what we will do," was the ready shout.

"And I understand that you have sent for the sheriff of the county to come here in force and settle the Boot Heel trouble," Charlie added. "Is that true?"

"It is," he was told.

"Then my advice is to hold on to this outlaw until he comes, or until the other trouble is settled, and then turn him over to the sheriff and his men."

"That is just the thing," agreed Mansfield, "and that is what we will do."

"Well, then," said the mysterious rider, "I turn him over to you. Take good care of him, for he is valuable."

"You are not going, are you?" he was asked.

"Yes," was the answer; "I must go. I have other business to attend to and other parts to play to-night."

"An' won't ye favor us with a glance at yer own mug?" shouted one.

Charlie laughed.

"Not just yet awhile, my friend," he replied. "You will know who I am ere many days, however."

With these words, the man of mystery turned and left the room, leaving the road-agent to the care and mercy of the men of Pot Leg.

All this time Sulphur Sam had said nothing.

"Well, what have you got to say for yourself?" he was asked when his captor was gone.

"I must say that you are a set of fools and easily duped," was the answer he gave.

"You are not very complimentary," said Sherman Mansfield. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that I am not Sulphur Sam at all," was the reply.

"Not Sulphur Sam?"

"No, gentlemen, not Sulphur Sam. I am only a poor devil that that masked outlaw who brought me here captured, dressed up in this rig, and forced to come here as a prisoner."

Every man looked at his neighbor in surprise and wonderment. Could there be anything in this story?

"What I am telling you is the truth," the outlaw assured them. "And it is my opinion," he added, "that that man is the real Sulphur Sam, and that he is trying to impose upon you to gain some great end."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

TACKLING A TENDERFOOT.

THIS was a cute dodge.

If he could raise a point of doubt in the minds of the citizens of the town, he might get a chance to escape.

But his hopes in that direction were soon upset.

"That is a pretty good trick to try to play," observed Mansfield, "but it will not work. You are certainly mounted upon Sulphur Sam's horse."

"That counts for nothing," said the outlaw; "he might be willing to forfeit his horse to carry a point he had in view."

"It is not very likely that he would, however," Mansfield rejoined.

It was still a fine point.

"If I can prove my identity to you, I suppose you are willing to have me do so, are you not?" the outlaw asked.

"You will be given a fair chance to do that," said Mansfield, "for we have no intention of letting you get away from us."

"An' if there is any doubt in th' minds of any of us," remarked one old miner, "I think I know of a plan ter remove it."

"What is your plan?" asked Mansfield.

"Send for Nebraska Nate," was the reply.

"Just the thought," the mine-owner agreed. "He came to town with Twilight Charlie, and must know something about the capture. Who will go for him?"

Several were willing, and started.

And while they were gone the outlaw was taken from the back of his horse and the animal was led away.

When the men returned Nebraska Nate and Lucian Alanson came with them.

It had been noticed that Howard Lang, the manager of the saloon, was not present this evening, and that Mansfield, the owner of the place, was tending his own bar. Some had inquired where the manager was, and the reply that Mansfield gave them was that the manager was on a spree and was in bed dead drunk.

When what is to follow has been read, a certain threat of Mansfield's will come to mind.

"You sent fer me, I onderstand, feller-mortals," said Nebraska Nate, when he came in.

"Yes, we sent for you," said Mansfield; "we want to know what you know about this prisoner."

"I know that he is a p'izen critter," answered Nate, "an' that he desarves ter be hanged."

"But he denies that he is Sulphur Sam," Mansfield explained.

"I don't blame him fer that," declared Nate, "fer he is in a bad box. He is that same Samuel, though, just th' same, an' thar's no doubt about that. I was right on hand when Twilight Charlie got ther drop onter him, and I guess he hain't changed his skin since then."

"That settles it," cried the crowd. "Away with him to th' log jail, an' a dozen good men ter guard him till ther sheriff comes."

This was the general desire of the public, and it was carried out. The prisoner was led away to the lock-up, and twelve trusty men were appointed to guard him.

About the time that he was taken from the saloon, who should stagger in but the manager.

He was to all appearances as drunk as a lord, and began to shout as wildly as any Thomas Triangle from Boot Heel might have done.

"Here, Lang," said the owner of the place, "this won't do; you had better go to bed again until you sleep off a little of your over-joyful."

"You mind your own business," was the retort. "I will do as I please here, and if you do not like it you can lump it. I am able to take care of myself, I reckon, an' I don't need ter be told what ter do by sich as you."

He staggered on into the room, and in his zigzag course ran heavily against Lucian Alanson.

The young man said nothing, but moved back to give the fellow plenty of room and to avoid any words with him.

But not so Lang.

He reeled around with a furious oath, and demanded:

"Say young feller, can't you stand up? You want ter look out who you're runnin' into."

"That is all right," said Lucian, with a smile; "I beg your pardon."

He did not want any trouble of any kind, and thought he would let the man have it his own way.

But Lang seemed to want to raise a muss.

"No it ain't all right, neither," he cried. "When a man runs inter me he has got ter git right down onter his knees and beg my pardon. An' that is what you will have ter do."

"I'll see you hanged first!" exclaimed Lucian, with a show of anger. "It was not I that ran into you, but you that ran into me."

"What! d'ye mean ter say that I'm a liar?" Lang shouted; "I'll make ye chaw them words, Mister Tenderfoot, or I'll chaw yer head off."

Lucian Alanson saw that he was in for trouble, and he braced himself to meet it.

"My friend," he said, "you wrong me. I did not run into you, but you into me; and then I tried to get out of your way. I want no quarrel with you, but if you will have it, I shall try and stand up for my side of the argument. Now you can make it peace or war, just as you please."

"It is fer you ter say which it shall be," retorted Lang. "You git down onto yer knees an' beg my pardon, an' I'll forgive ye; but if ye don't, I'll take it out of yer hide in short order."

"You may as well begin, then," invited the young man, "for I shall certainly not do what you ask of me."

"Then you must take the other thing," cried Lang, and he advanced.

Sherman Mansfield had all this time made a show of trying to quiet the man, but all to no purpose, of course.

This was the carrying out of his pre-arranged scheme.

Another present took a hand in the game at this stage of the proceedings, however, and that was Nebraska Nate.

When Lang advanced he came to a sudden halt with Nate's revolver under his nose, and Nate said:

"Hold yer hosses jest a minute, my friend, and hark ter me. I am another that says it was you that run inter th' young man, an' not him inter you, an' I'm heur ter back up my words. You have th' name of bein' a

fighter, but you kain't run in on top o' any man that Nebrasky Nate backs, an' ye don't want ter fergit it.

"My quarrel ain't with you," growled Lang, "an' you had better stand out o' th' way."

"Stand aside, Nate," requested Lucian, "and let him come for me."

Nate was astonished.

"D'ye mean that, younker?" he asked.

"Yes, I mean it," Lucian assured.

"All right," said Nate, as he lowered his weapon. "I reckon you must know what you're doin', so I'm out of it."

"The best thing you could 'a' done," muttered Lang, "fer I reckon I'd be good fer th' pair of ye."

Nate smiled at this, but stepped back to let them have room.

"Now, you little whipper-snapper," demanded Lang, "will go git you down an' beg my pardon? fer this is yer last chance."

"You have my reply; make the most of it," was the answer.

"All right," Lang cried, "I'll take it out of yer hide, then."

He sprung forward, but the next he knew he was lying flat upon his back.

Mention has been made that Harold Featherstone and Lucian Alanson were athletic, and so they were in the full sense of the term. They were members of one of the best athletic clubs in New York, and Lucian had few equals there at boxing.

Nevers was a man more surprised than Howard Lang, unless we except his worthy master, Mansfield.

Lang was not drunk, and if he had been, this was enough to have sobered him.

"If you want any more," said the young man, "step right up and get it."

Almost every person in the place was shouting and cheering, and Lang was wild. He knew that his reputation depended on the way in which he came out of this fight. He well knew that he was in the wrong, but that made no difference; he must win.

He was a fair fighter, but he was not "up" in the science of self-defense to compare with Lucian, and while he was a great deal stronger than the young man, his strength amounted to little.

He got up as quickly as he could, and rushed forward as before, and then for a few seconds the battled waged hot.

But it was soon over.

There were three or four sounds of "spat!" "spat!" in quick succession, and once more the fighter of the town was laid out.

And then the cries of the people present were deafening.

Sherman Mansfield looked on in surprise and chagrin.

"What d'ye think of yer big bruiser now, boss?" inquired Nebraska Nate, as his breast swelled with pride at the splendid work of one of the young men of his party.

And the owner of the saloon had to swallow the pill and say:

"That young man is a terror. It serves Lang right; he had no business to provoke the fight."

And that was what everybody else thought.

Lang got up again, but this time he was prudent enough to know that he had found his master. He was no fool, and he said:

"Young feller, you're the best man, and I have got sense enough ter know it. You needn't beg my pardon unless you want to."

This raised a laugh, and Lang was thought not so bad of after all.

But for Sherman Mansfield it was a bitter pill. Evil at heart, he had planned this for the purpose of putting the young man out of his path; and here the young man had actually whipped the best man of the town.

CHAPTER XXXV.

PLANNING REVENGE.

THE little barber just over the way was in great trouble.

He had lost his pocketbook.

Chauncey DeBrown heard of his loss, and was anxious for Walter Hapgood to return, so that he could consult with him as to what it would be best to do.

The barber, it would seem, had not missed his pocketbook until that afternoon, and he had no idea where he had lost it.

And now on the door of his shop was a notice, offering a reward for its return.

About an hour after the departure of Twilight Charlie from the town, after his handing over of Sulphur Sam to the town authorities, Walter Hapgood arrived.

He had been away with a message from Colonel Featherstone to the sheriff, and he brought back good news.

That news was that the sheriff and a force of armed men would come over to Pot Leg on the following day, and that if there was any further trouble with the people of Boot Heel, he would make an attack upon their town and drive them out of the county.

When he had finished his business with the colonel, the sport went early to the saloon where he boarded to retire to bed and get some rest.

But there the Bostonian was lying in wait for him, and the sport had to listen to what he had to say.

"Lost his pocketbook, has he?" he said, when DeBrown had told him all about it.

"Yes," DeBrown substantiated; "and there is no doubt but this is his."

"Well, do you want to give it to him?" asked the sport.

"Yes," was the reply. "I do."

"And why?"

"Well, because it is his and not mine, and I have no right to hold it."

"But see what damage he has done to you and me."

"I know that; but I am not such a man as he is, and I believe in the rule—'Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.'"

"Well, you are right, and I must confess that you are a better man than I. Take the money to him by all means, and shame him. But that will make me all the more determined in my revenge. Go over and see him and then come back and let me know how you make it with him."

So said the sport, and DeBrown set out at once.

Crossing over to the barber's shop, he entered boldly, and said:

"Mr. Snowbank, I believe you have lost a pocketbook."

"Yes," the little barber answered; "so I have. Have you found one?"

For one guilty of the mean acts he was guilty of, the barber showed a remarkable front of brass.

"Yes, sir, I have found one," DeBrown replied. "Will you please describe the one you lost?"

The barber did so, and DeBrown delivered the prize to him.

"I am ever so much obliged to you," he cried, as he clutched it eagerly. "Where did you find it?"

"It was lying on the floor in my room this morning," DeBrown answered.

The barber had no idea that he had lost it there, and this shot floored him. He turned red and then white, and his guilt was plainly written upon his face.

"I—I hope," he gasped, "that you do not think that I lost it there, do you? I hope you do not think that it was me that mashed your horn and ruined your clothes, do you?"

"How came you to know that anything of the kind has been done?" DeBrown quietly asked.

"W—wh—why, I—I heard so; that is all."

"It is very strange how you could hear it," said DeBrown, "for I have been trying to keep it as secret as possible."

"Well, er—er—I don't know. I am obliged to you for the return of my pocketbook to me, but really I cannot understand how it came in your room."

"I think that I can understand it," declared DeBrown, "but no matter."

The Bostonian went out, leaving the little barber with coals of fire heaped upon his head, to speak of it in a figurative way.

The barber had not been getting along very well with Pansy Mayflower.

She had refused to read any more of his letters or poetry, and his heart was sad and heavy.

But still he had hopes, though it was plain to be seen that either DeBrown or Walter Hapgood had a better chance than he, and DeBrown had no chance at all as compared with the sport.

DeBrown went back to Hapgood's room,

and there told him of all that had taken place.

"Oh! he is guilty; there is no question about that," the sport declared, "and he shall feel the weight of my hand in a mild way. Not that I intend to do him any bodily injury, for I do not; but I will make him wish he had never been born."

"Do unto others as—"

"That is all right," the sport interrupted, "and if I were guilty of such a mean and contemptible trick I would expect to be tarred and feathered."

"And what do you intend to do?" DeBrown asked.

"You will have to wait and see," was the reply. "Say," the sport added, "do you think that you can wake up and call me at midnight?"

"Yes, if you want me to do so."

"Well, please do so. It is very important that I should be up at that time, and I am afraid to trust to myself to wake up."

"Very well. I will call you."

And so they parted.

True to his word, Chauncey was up at midnight to call his friend, and as soon as he was called the sport got up and dressed and started out of town.

He had refused to tell DeBrown where he was going, but the latter more than half suspected that he intended to put up some "job" on the little barber.

And DeBrown guessed aright.

The sport went right out into the hills, and there he laid his direction toward the west, following a course where no trail led the way.

A walk of thirty minutes brought him to one of the wildest spots that can well be imagined.

Here he paused, and assuring himself that he was not followed, uttered a low whistle.

Instantly followed the barking of a dog, that seemed to come from overhead, and then after a few moments the whistle was answered by another in the same manner.

This signal the sport answered by two short whistles, and then down the face of the rock near where he stood came a rope ladder.

This the sport caught hold of at once, and climbed up to the top of the cliff from which it had been lowered.

There he was met by a man, and at the heels of the man was the dog that had been heard barking.

"You are no doubt a little surprised to see me here at this hour, John," the sport said, "but I am here on business."

"Do you want th' hoss?" the man asked.

"No, not this time," was the reply; "let us go to the cave."

The man having drawn up the ladder, they left the spot and in a few moments entered a small cave.

Here everything was fixed up comfortably, and it looked not unlike the retreat of some outlaw or desperate character.

There was a small stove, a table, some chairs, and a bed, and the cave felt quite warm and homelike.

"Make up a hot fire just as soon as you can," the sport directed, and he threw aside his hat and coat as though he had some work to do.

The man obeyed his directions, very little being said while he was doing it, and in a little while the fire was as hot as could be desired.

"All ready," he then announced.

"Remove a lid and set in that stone pot," the sport then directed.

This was done.

When the stone pot began to get hot the sport arose and threw into it a handful of silver money.

"What in blazes be you goin' ter do now?" his companion demanded.

"I will tell you, to pass away the time while I am at work," the sport promised, and forthwith he began and told his man all that he intended to do and why.

And the man laughed as though he would have a fit.

When the silver in the pot began to melt, then the sport went to a strong box in the end of the cave and brought out several bottles of various sizes and shapes.

From one of these he poured a quantity of acid into the stone pot, and the fumes that instantly arose were almost stifling.

This cleared after a little time, however, and then other acids were added to the mass in the pot.

"You see I have to be very careful," the young chemist remarked, "or there would be an explosion that would render this cave a thing of the past."

It required quite a little work to bring the desired result, but at last it was done, and then the sport poured the contents of the pot out into another pot to cool.

When the dark-looking liquid was sufficiently cool, he put it into a bottle and corked it up and put it into his pocket.

"So far so good," he remarked; "and now let me get some other things and I will leave you again and let you return to bed."

"I'd a heap ruther go along with ye," the man observed.

The sport supplied himself with a tiny bottle of some sort of stuff, a brush, and an old horse-blanket, and then announced that he was ready to go.

The man went out with him and lowered the rope ladder, and bidding him good-night the sport descended and set out to return to the town.

"It is a little rough to play such a trick," he mused, as he walked along, "but he richly deserves it, and now that I have gone thus far I will give him the benefit of my labor."

He hastened on, and within thirty minutes was back again at Pot Leg.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A MODERN MIRACLE.

WHEN the sport entered the town he took care that no one should see him.

Making his way across the valley between Empire Camp and Pot Leg, he went down to the river and then walked up toward the point nearest opposite to where the barber's shop stood.

There he turned and made his way to the rear door of the shop.

Here he stopped.

He had had this work in mind ever since the barber had served him the mean trick that has been described, and had studied means of entering the shop.

Stepping to one of the windows, he carefully opened the shutter.

He paused then and listened, placing his ear against the glass to do so.

This was near where the barber slept, and he heard him snoring away at a terrific rate.

Taking his knife, the sport thrust its blade up between the parts of the sash and pushed back the catch, and then slowly and silently raised the lower half.

This done, he entered as silently as a ghost might have done.

Once within, he took from his pocket the little bottle of which mention has been made, dampened his handkerchief with its contents, and then placed it over the sleeping barber's nose.

It took only a moment for the barber to be put beyond the chance of waking for some time.

When this had all been done, the sport secured the blanket he had brought, and then closed the window and pulled the curtain down, having first of all closed the shutters as an extra precaution.

His next move was to search for a lamp, and as soon as he found one he made a light.

Then came the real work that had brought him there.

Going to the bed, he uncovered the little barber and took off all his clothes, making him as naked as when born.

This done, he rolled him over to the far side of the bed, spread out the old blanket on the bed, and then rolled the sleeping man back upon that.

All this could be done without the least chance of the man's waking.

The sport's next act was to put on a pair of gloves. Then he opened the bottle of stuff that he had so recently made in the mountain cave, and dipping into it a small brush, he began to paint the sleeping man from head to feet.

At first the liquid made a dark stain where it touched, but by the time the artist had worked down to the feet the upper part of the body had turned as black as jet.

Not a single inch of the little barber's skin

was spared, and when the sport had done, the man before him was as black as the blackest negro that ever grew.

The sport had to smile.

"What a time there will be when he awakes," he thought.

Waiting until the wash was perfectly dry, he then took the blanket from under his victim and replaced the clothing just as he had found it.

When all was done, he rolled up the blanket, throwing into it the gloves he had worn, as well as the brush and bottle, and then making sure that not a drop of the stain had been left upon anything there, he prepared to go.

Putting the window-curtain just as he had found it, and also the lamp he had used, he took great care to make everything in the room just as he had found it. And this being done, he went out by way of the rear door which closed and locked with a spring.

Going down to the river he tied up the blanket and its contents, attached a big stone to it, and then threw it out into the water.

His work was now done, and he went to the saloon, let himself in quietly with a pass-key, and went to bed.

When the barber awoke some hours later, he was a sight to behold. He was so black that he fairly shone.

It was semi-darkness in his room when he dressed, and he did not notice the state he was in.

Where he slept was a little room just off from his shop, and he never tarried there for any other purpose than to sleep. The shop proper was his home.

When he stepped out into the shop he glanced into the first glass that he passed, as was his habit, and the instant that he caught sight of his face he uttered a scream of terror and started back as though he had been shot.

What did it mean?

For some moments he stood and looked at his face as though powerless to move.

Then he turned and threw open a window-shutter in order to see the better, and as he did so he noticed that his hands, too, were black.

Now thoroughly alarmed, he ran back to the glass and looked again.

"My stars!" he gasped; "I have been changed to a nigger! Oh, what will Pansy, dear Pansy say!"

His face, his neck, his hands, all were as black as they could be, and into the back room he dived to investigate further.

His worst fears were realized; he was black from crown to toe.

When he had got his clothes on again, there came a rap at the door.

What in the world was he to do? He could not show himself to the public. He decided all in a moment that he would write just one farewell line to his Pansy, and then would kill himself.

Just then, however, the rap at the door became imperative, and the voice of Sherman Mansfield, the mine owner, called:

"Come! hang your lazy skin! get up out of that! I want to be shaved."

The little barber trembled in his boots. Mansfield was his oest customer, and he stood in awe of him. What was he to do?

Running out to the door, he cried:

"Oh, Mister Mansfield, please go away! I cannot let you in. I—"

"You can't let me in!" the mine-owner thundered. "What do you mean by that? If you don't open this door instantly, I will kick it down."

With trembling hands the little barber undid the fastenings and opened the door.

In stepped the mine-owner, and the instant his eyes fell upon the black wretch he burst into a howl of laughter.

"What in the name of King George have you been doing?" he demanded.

"N-n-nothing, sir!" the barber gasped. "I am changed."

"I should say you were! And do you mean to tell me that you do not know how this change came?"

"I do not know, sir. I was all right when I went to bed last night, but when I got up this morning I was just as you see me now."

Now Mansfield knew at once that there

was some joke afoot, and was not the man to spoil a good thing, so he said:

"Fred, this is serious. It is sent upon you for something that you have done. What have you been up to?"

"I am sure that I do not know," the barber replied; but even as he spoke, the memory of the way in which he had treated the sport and the Bostonian came up in his mind and gave him the lie.

"Have you tried to wash it off?" Mansfield asked.

The barber had not, and his face lighted up at the thought that perhaps it was only a joke, and that it would come off with a little soap and water.

Away he rushed for the basin, and the way he did apply the soap and water was a caution.

But he soon realized that whatever the change was, it was one that soap and water could not remove.

All his fears came back with a rush.

"What in the world am I to do?" he cried.

"Give it up," answered the mine owner; "but as I do not care whether I am shaved by a black man or a white one, get to work and give me a shave."

"Oh! I shall go mad!" the poor wretch cried, as he ran around the shop in the wildest way that can be imagined.

Just then two or three other customers dropped in, and the howl they all set up was loud enough to wake the whole town.

In two minutes the shop was full.

Chauncey DeBrown was up, and hearing the noise and wondering what it all meant, he ran out to see.

As soon as he saw that the excitement was at the barber's shop, he knew that the sport was the cause of it, and he stepped over to see what he had done. And when he did see, he was no less surprised than the barber himself had been.

The word flew like fire, and soon the whole town was out to see the wonderful freak of nature—or whatever it was.

The barber took on so that it was feared that he would go mad, and some of those present tried to lead him to think that it was only a joke. But the victim would not hear to that. It would not wash off, and that satisfied him that it was there to stay. Besides, he knew that no one could get into his shop at night without waking him, and even if they had, they could not have put the stuff on him without leaving a mark somewhere, and no marks were to be found.

This was all reasonable, and no one could imagine how the change had come about.

Everybody heard of it, and everybody—even the ladies at the Camp—had to call at the shop in the course of the forenoon to see the little barber. And when Pansy Mayflower called the barber fainted dead away.

The sport was on hand to see the fun, if fun it could be called, and he gave the word around to some of the little barber's most intimate friends that they had better watch him to see that he did not try to kill himself.

The sport was sorry now that he had carried out so rough a trick, even though he felt that it was no more than the fellow deserved for what he had done.

About noon the barber sent for Hapgood and DeBrown, and requested to see them in private in the shop.

The two went over, and when the barber had closed the door he made a confession in full of all he had done, and paid the damage then and there; though, thinking that he had suffered almost enough, the two young men did not state the full value of their loss.

This had been brought about by the word dropped by Sherman Mansfield, and now that he had confessed his guilt and had done what he could to right the wrong, he believed that the stain would be removed from his skin.

And sure enough, some time during the afternoon a small bottle was found in the shop, addressed to Mr. Snowbank, and with it was a note directing how to use the contents; and in a few hours the little barber had resumed his natural color.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE FINAL STRUGGLE.

THE coming of the New York party to the town of Pot Leg had been the signal for a

series of lively events to rise up and make things interesting.

Sulphur Sam was yet safe in jail, and the citizens of the town meant that he should stay there until taken away by the sheriff.

The sheriff, by the way, had arrived, and was preparing to make a raid on the town of Boot Heel.

Sulphur Sam's cabin had been visited, by request of Myra Shelden, and the body of the man who had fallen at her hand had now been buried.

As the day drew to a close, and the excitement caused by the little barber's change of color had worn away, it began to be noticed that there was a great number of strangers in the town.

Who they were no one seemed to know, but it was suspected that they hailed from Boot Heel, since one or two of them were recognized as having been seen there.

They were well behaved, and little attention was paid to them.

At night it was the intention of the sheriff to ride over to Boot Heel with a large force of men and bring the wild people of that "burg" to terms.

It was getting well along in the evening when they set out, and they had been gone about an hour when suddenly through the town of Pot Leg rung the awful cry of "fire!"

Out of doors the people of the town rushed and to their horror they beheld not only one fire but half a dozen.

And then out of the canyon on the north poured a horde of the denizens of Boot Heel, all armed, and all upon mischief bent.

And now was explained the presence of so many strangers in the town. They were the fire-bugs from Boot Heel, and this was their work.

At Empire Camp the excitement was great. But it was not so great that Colonel Featherstone could not act. Wounded as he was, he could yet direct, and he gave orders at once to call his men together and barricade the main building.

Nebraska Nate took the lead, and as soon as the alarm was sounded, the men who had acted under the colonel in the other battles came running to the Camp in haste.

And so it was that by the time the fight had fairly begun at Pot Leg the Camp was all ready to defend itself.

Other fires sprung up here and there, and it looked as though the town was doomed. But the men of Pot Leg were not long in getting into shape to defend themselves and their property, and they soon began to make it interesting for the men of Boot Heel.

No doubt the fires would have made bad work, but there came up a hard rain just at the time when it was most needed, as though the hand of Providence were in it, and their headway was checked.

But the rain made no difference to the fighting. That went right on with desperate fury, and it soon began to appear that Pot Leg was getting the worst of it.

After making as good a stand as they could in the street, the citizens had at last to retire into the buildings and shut themselves in. The odds against them were too great for them to fight hand to hand in the street.

And this the men of Boot Heel took as a sign that they had won the day, and they went howling up and down the street like so many demons.

But the main object of their attack was yet to be gained. And in a body they ran down to the Camp.

They did not all go, however, for they were wise enough to leave enough men in Pot Leg to keep up the fight there, and hold the citizens within doors.

One of the leaders of the gang from Boot Heel was Thomas Triangle. And he made himself heard plentifully.

When they arrived at the Camp they made a rush for the main building, and the striped zebra bawled out:

"Heur we be, th' howlin' whoopers from Boot Heel, an' we mean business right from ther shoulder. Ther best thing you kin do is ter open them 'ar doors an' let us right in. It's death to yer if ye don't, an' if ye do we'll be a leetle easy on yer."

"I would give a fortune to be able to get out there at them," complained the colonel, as he saw and heard what was going on.

"An' we're just fixin' ter go out after 'em," said the man who had assumed command of

the old guard. "An' we means ter give 'em rats, too."

In a few minutes they were ready, and then they went out by a back door and formed in line in the rear of the house, and the first the men of Boot Heel knew of their coming was when they got a volley from their rifles at short range.

This was more than they could stand and face, and they broke and ran like so many frightened jack-rabbits.

And after them went the defenders, and the fight became hot.

Seeing that the tables were turning against them, the invaders shouted for their comrades at the town to join them. And as this raised the siege at the town, the good citizens trooped out too, and there was lively times there while it lasted.

The main object of the men of Boot Heel seemed to be to do all the damage they could, and they did considerable.

In the jail at Pot Leg several of their townsmen were confined, and they made a raid upon that building.

The result was, the prisoners were all let out, and among them was the notorious outlaw—Sulphur Sam.

Being under so strong a guard, the outlaw's handcuffs had been removed in order to give him the use of his arms, and now he made use of them indeed.

Out he ran, as soon as it was possible, and knocking down the first man he met he took his weapons from him and thus was armed. Then he whistled for his horse, and as soon as that faithful animal could get out of the stable where it was tied it ran to him.

With a yell of victory the outlaw mounted and dashed out of the valley.

No one could give chase or make any effort to hold him, for the men of the town had their hands full. The invaders were again getting the upper hand, and it looked as though they must win the fight after all.

Just when the cloud of war seemed darkest, however, the sheriff and his party swept in to the rescue with a cheer that gave the defenders renewed courage and struck the invaders with dismay.

Seeing that they were now outnumbered two to one they turned to fly, but the sheriff and his men were upon them before they could do so, and in a very short time they were glad to cry out for quarter and to throw down their arms and surrender.

It did not take long to search out the ring-leaders, and they were brought before Colonel Featherstone and the head men of the town, the sheriff presiding.

And then the mystery was cleared up. The head leader of all was found to be one Henry Featherstone, Colonel Featherstone's own brother.

The two had not met since they had come of age, and at that time their father had turned Henry out of home on account of his evil ways. He had never been heard from, and it was supposed that he had long since died. But such was not the case. He lived, and had gone on from bad to worse until he was one of the worst characters of the West; the leader of the evil wretches at Boot Heel.

When he learned that Colonel Featherstone was coming West, he took pains to learn who he was, and when he did learn he tried hard to get him to pitch his camp at Boot Heel, but failed to do so.

He was now known as Henry Hoopley, and of course the colonel could not suspect who he was.

The woman who had warned the party once, on the night when they were out on the river, was Hoopley's wife. She was less evil than her brutal husband, and had pity on the brother and his party.

The meeting between the brothers was very touching, but it amounted to nothing so far as Henry was concerned. He refused every aid that the colonel offered him, and at last was led away by the sheriff along with the other prisoners.

The sheriff's early return was due to Mrs. Hoopley, who told him that another attack was intended that night, and of course the sheriff lost no time in getting back.

The fight had been a bloody one, and the dead and dying were many. But it was the last, and the men of Pot Leg were glad accordingly.

And among the dead was Sherman Mans-

field, who would no doubt have made further trouble for the Empire Camp party had he lived.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL.

A LITTLE time after the fight was all over, and the meeting had been held between the ring-leaders and the sheriff and citizens, who should come tearing into town but Twilight Charlie, the Road Sport.

He made straight for the Camp, dismounted, and rushed into the house exclaiming:

"Has Sulphur Sam escaped?"

He was told that he had.

"Then he may go," the man of mystery cried. "I had trouble enough to take him once, and now I am willing to let some one else try it."

As he spoke the Road Sport threw aside his mask, and there stood—none other than Walter Hapgood.

It was a surprise to all, but when they came to reflect that they had never seen Hapgood and Twilight Charlie at the same time, they wondered that they had not guessed it before.

And then explanations were made all around.

When asked how it was that he had escaped death so many times when it had seemed that he had been hard hit, he displayed a shirt of mail that he wore under his outer garments.

He was just what he had claimed to be, a chemist of Denver out for a little vacation, and for the sake of a little excitement he had planned this scheme for the purpose of capturing Sulphur Sam.

And but for the interfering of Boot Heel it would have all been a success.

As it was, the outlaw was not heard of again in that part of the State, though he continued to make his name a terror elsewhere, until at last, about two years later, he met his death at the hands of the sheriff of another county.

The sheriff and his men did make a raid upon the town of Boot Heel, after their work at Pot Leg was over, and not a single building was left standing.

And the denizens of the place were scattered far and wide, except the leaders in the recent troubles, who were punished to the full extent of the law.

And then peace reigned.

The Empire Camp party remained all summer, and when they at last started for the East, Mrs. Featherstone had fully regained her health.

But there was one of the party who did not go back with the others, and that one was Pansy Mayflower. She remained at Denver as the wife of Walter Hapgood.

So Chauncey DeBrown and the little barber were left in that direction, but they took it with as good grace as could be expected.

When the party were ready to go, the colonel sent for special stages, and Big Gid was one of the drivers sent. All were glad to see him again, and when they parted with him all wished him the best of luck for the rest of his life.

Frances Featherstone is now the happy wife of Lucian Alanson, and Myra Shelden is wedded happily to Harold Featherstone.

All are still living and happy, and the colonel and Mrs. Featherstone are proud of their grandchildren.

Chauncey DeBrown returned to Boston when the summer was over, and he too is now a happy husband and father. And he still plays the cornet.

Not long since there was a reunion in New York, and among those present were Mr. and Mrs. Hapgood, and an old Westerner named Nate Redwood. And it can be safely said that the meeting was a happy one.

"Nebraska Nate" is still living, and his home is at "Pot Leg," that town now being known by another name—one more suitable to Frances Featherstone's ideas of the fitness of things.

Walter Hapgood still lives at Denver, where both he and his pretty wife are highly respected. His friends are legion, but very few of them know that he once figured as a road-agent for a brief period, and fewer, still, that he was once known as Twilight Charlie, the Road Sport.

THE END.

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